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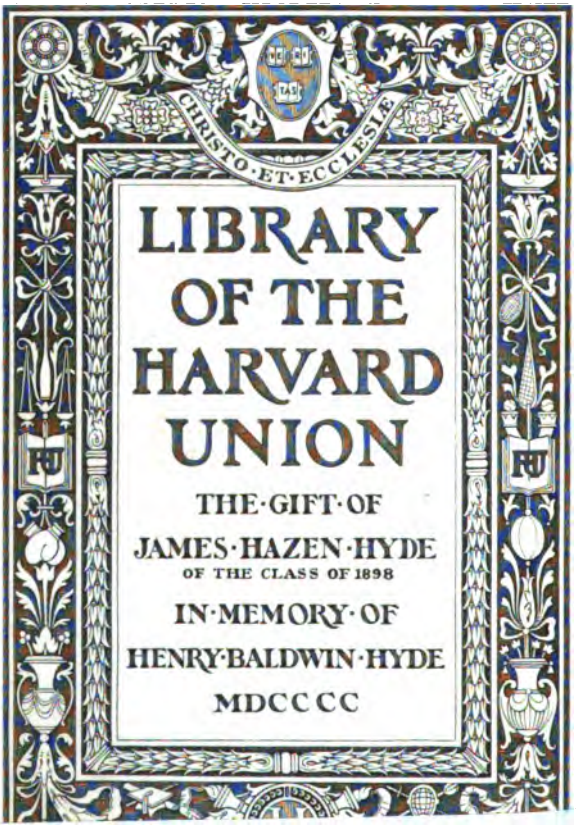

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MAY MARGARET

"THERE WAS A CURIOUS CONSTRAINT UPON US"

(See page 53)

MAY MARGARET

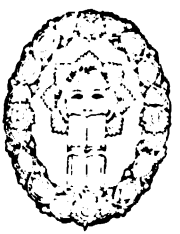
CALLED

"THE FAIR MAID
OF GALLOWAY"

BY

S. R. CROCKETT

1662



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"The Memory of Her Beauty Lives"

MAY MARGARET

CHAPTER I

BREAD-AND-WATER—AND KITCHEN THERETO!

OH, I was so tired—so weary. I could hear my jaw crack, at the corners where the strings are, each time I yawned. And not without reason. For I was nearly eighteen and had been two years in the nunnery of the holy St. Brigida of Cheverney.

Lord, Lord! how I hated it—I, Margaret Douglas, who had been the petted of great men and strong men ever since I could remember—aye, and before! I, who had known Maud Lindsay (called the "Snarer of Hearts") in her best time, who had sworn, when no more than thirteen, that I would outdo her—to end thus, to be despatched like a bale of goods at sixteen years of age out of Scotland! (Well, *that* I would not have minded so greatly. 'Tis a dull sour place, wet above and boggy below, with much damp mist between!)

But what irked me was that I, who before I could walk had been called the Fair Maid of Galloway, should be let grow fusty and frowsy as the Sister of Mercy who goes from to door to door, begging for the poor—all because I had a cousin who wanted to marry me and so keep Galloway and the Highland estates in the family coffer—bah!

Well, at any rate, I had just to bear it. *Tinkle-tankle!* Oh, yes, there went the weary bells, like cracked tin mugs which the gipsy-folk peddle out of their asses' saddlebags along with coarse cloth for "jupes," or sleeved waistcoats, and at the bottom red earth for marking sheep withal!

At six o'clock in the morning, black roaring winter or

gracious June—out you must turn in this our Convent of the Birch——aye, though you be thrice a Princess in your own right. And they would not let you have so much as a drop of warm water in a pottery jar for the foot of your bed (mightily comforting it is to lone women!), nor even suffer you to sleep in your woollen *gonelle,* which is to say gown, that hath a hood to it, and, being turned head-and-heels, makes an admirable nest for cold great-toes a-nights. I have suffered from cold feet all my days. Indeed, if I had not, perhaps I had been a happier woman.[1]

Then *tinkle-tankle* all over again and prayers and reading of the Scripture at nine. Never a bite or a sup till half-past ten, when, while you feed in silence, they read to you out of the Lives of the Saints—about how Sister Brigida, afterwards martyred, established this holy order of nuns and died in the hope of a better life. The which I judged to be an *espérance* noways over-sanguine! For the Good God knows she would have had to travel fast and far, that same holy Bridget, to find a worse life than that rule conventual she established, and which, for my sins, had been transported from the savage land of Ireland (where it belonged) to the sweet and smiling Touraine that lay outside these weary walls. But since you cannot see a smile even thirty miles broad through walls four feet thick, I might just as well have been on the Bog of Allen.

So it went on. *Tinkle-tank* of bells—whirr of doves' wings (we had them three times a week to evening refection—the wings oftener than the doves, so far as I was concerned). *Coo-roo-coo-roo!* From high up in the bell-tower the sound came. Then the buzz of flies and wasps and angry red-bottomed bees trying to find their way through the painted window-panes. Yes, oh yes, it was peaceful, and hungrysome and chastening, and made me wish to be a crow or a sparrow or a midge—I was not at all particular—at any rate something that could fly away into the blue beyond the confinement of these

[1] There is a pithy note here inserted by Le Sieur Philip Herault, which, however, need not impede the Fair Maid's narrative.

sorrowful walls, within which the Lady Superior forever snored in her cell and Sister Eulalie yattered eternally at one's tail, snivelling out threats of punishment if you climbed a tree or so much as took a garden ladder to look over the wall. Not that there was much to see, when you did look over—only the wide spread of the forest and the green fields—not in patches, as in Scotland, with heather and whin-bloom everywhere, but all in cultivated squares, like a painted chess-board. There were poor men, also, with legs blackened in the sun, half-naked or even with no more than a clout about them, that ran at a look, or shrieked for the clink of an iron ring.

Once I threw over the wall to one of these poor wretches my purple jupe (the colour never became me), which was of warm cloth—also because the weather, being August, made me to sweat when I wore it.

And for this, as well as for speaking to a man, Sister Eulalie docked me of all food save bread-and-water for four days. "Yet," said I, "Bridget of Kildare, the holy, never had petticoat in her life to bless herself withal! So where is the harm?"

"You have looked upon a man—a mortal sin!" said she, turning up the sourish, plum-coloured tip of her nose, which had a drop on it chilly as winter, even in the summer heats.

"Well, people do not die of it. So did my mother before me!" quoth I, knowing well all the time that I was not wise, yet being tempted, and my choler getting the better of me.

"But he looked upon you," she cried, raising her voice in order to wake the Superior, "the while you took off——"

"No, no," I said, willing to appease her if possible before it was too late, "he was no man really, only a wild savage, black as a Moor of Barbary. And, besides, I went down the ladder backwards, and let my jupe fall to the ground betwixt the wall and a gooseberry bush——"

"Silence!" commanded Sister Eulalie, raising her hand, with one finger pointed to the zenith; "silence or

I will take you indoors forthwith to Madame the Superior!"

Then, being at the time but a girl, I pouted, and answered back.

"Why, it is nothing," I said. "Did not the Scripture which was read from the lectern in the refectory on Wednesday tell of the never-to-be-sufficiently-reverenced Judith who did more than that? Yes, much more, or she is sore belied——"

"Take from me, thou wicked one, *six days' bread-and*——"

But at that very moment the great gate opened, and through it I could see, with a train of churchmen behind him—shaven, shorn, clad in white and scarlet and green, with a peaked cap all glittering with gold upon his head, who but Laurence McKim, my old playmate who had helped to save me (though I had forgotten much of the details) from the terrible Sieur de Retz, at Machecoul. Also, who used to kiss me—I remember that. Yes, it is true, my memory only shows in patches, but the patches are mostly bright ones.

Well, who will blame if I broke away from Sister Eulalie, crying "Larry, Larry!"

Half crying too—or perhaps a little more than half. And so would anyone—yes, anyone! That is, anyone who had been as long as I in the convent-prison of St. Brigida of Cheverney.

I flung myself upon him. He was riding a white mule oh, finer, much finer than that of the Bishop of Evreaux. And I was so agile from being fed like a greyhound, and with being so very glad to see him, that I would have kissed him if I could. Yes, truly, what is the use of being a princess else! But, as it was, I could only get my arm half about his waist, before Sister Eulalie was upon me.

He bent down to disengage me gently, murmuring in Scots, "Wait a little while!" And then he stretched out two fingers over my head and said in a voice full of the music which first made my uncle take him to Dulce Cor as a chorister, "*Bless you, my child!*"

As one stricken by palsy, Sister Eulalie fell back, marvelling at the great ecclesiast and his princely retinue. And (best of all) Larry, my Larry gave her his ring to kiss. It was good to see. Also he queried with his eye if I loved her—if she had been good to me. But I shook my head and frowned till he understood, and nodded, meaning thereby that he had come to do some little regulating of accounts.

"I have been to Rome, sister," he said, "the point of my right shoe and the four iron shoes of my beast have been blessed by the Holy Father. If there be sin upon you, bend down and kiss them also."

And while Sister Eulalie was, for her soul's good, embracing of the beast's near front hoof (and doing it gingerly, too, for the mule had a spirit of its own), Larry whispered to me, "These behind there do not matter!" At the same time he waved his hand towards his followers. They all with one accord turned their heads from us in the direction of the garden gate.

He then pushed out his foot in the silver stirrup for a mounting step.

"Now!" he whispered.

And in a moment, with the help of his hand, I was up like a bird. And it is past telling how good it was. For, judge ye, it was two years since I had been kissed—by a man, that is. And others do not really count, as I have seen. Well, in a moment I was down again and toying demurely with my rosary, before the white mule and Sister Eulalie had agreed about the salutation of the last shoe of blessed iron. Larry had his people well trained. For nobody laughed. Indeed, what more natural than that I should embrace one of my own folk after two years. Yet what the young man's manners at Rome must have been, to make them as biddable, it is, as I tell him, better only guessing.

Ah, it was a good world after all—that which God had made; and has a way of improving suddenly when it is at its black worst.

CHAPTER II

ONE LEG GREEN AND ONE LEG PINK

FOR, after all, Laurence was a good deal older than I. And that makes a difference. Besides, he had known me from the time that Maud Lindsay sent me to play with him, that she might have the more time (and the better) in which to torment his brother Sholto with her wilfulnesses.

That was, of course, before they were married and had five children. Some time before.

But all of that may be read in the history, that is titled after the chief of our house, "The Black Douglas." But that is writ solemnly and of set purpose; also straight on, as a book should be, while this which for my pleasure I am writing contains just the things that a woman has done and thought and heard and seen ever since she was a girl, and is of little value save to herself and to make the winter nights pass.

And so Laurence McKim was an abbot, and, indeed, might have been a bishop had he wished it. But he was not given that way, having enough knowledge of himself to know that he was not worthy. That he was a real Lord Abbot I knew. For had not I myself made him so—or, rather, my cousins William and James, who acted for me, and did not cross me in aught, save only in sending me to this abominable convent!

But that is always the way with men. They give us a thousand things we do not want; they refuse us the one thing we do.

I wonder, indeed, how they would have liked it themselves. William would have spitted the porteress in a week, I know, and broke open the great spiked door. But James, who was ever ready with his answer, had in after-times the effrontery to tell me that he would have

liked it, contenting himself always well where women were.

Bah! At any rate, I am not come to that yet. *Then* I was glad enough to see Larry. Yes, glad with a great gladness that no man can tell. And he did not even damp me when he out with a great folded parchment, all done in purple and black, with the seal of St. Peter hanging to it, almost as big as the great censor of Trèves which only a six-foot man can swing.

And then, last of all, there came out the Lady Superior, whom we maids called the Bald Cat. I mean that I did—I, and two French girls who, for various kittenishnesses wrought in overstrait homes, had been sent to the Sign of the Bald Cat to repent themselves of their sins. The Lady Superior's other name was Marie Noël de St. Verrier, and she had (I remarked it myself, but not overtly to Sister Eulalie) as much discernment of the good things of life or the honest well-meaning thoughts of men and women, as a sow hath of the perfumes in a flower garden. She had but one table in her decalogue—that at which she did continually over-eat herself. But one article in her *credo,* that all was right which was done within the convent of St. Brigida of Cheverney, and all wrong that was done outside of it.

Well—there was more done in St. Brigida than was told to Madame Noël de St. Verrier—otherwise and more exactly the Bald Cat.

But let it be understood that Laurence, Venerable Prior of the Abbey of Holy Devorgil, called *Dulce Cor* by Solway Side, did not in the least misbecome his errand. Troth, sirs, I wot not! William, my cousin, now Earl of Douglas, would not have sent him else. He was, albeit, a young and personable prelate, also well to look upon—a thing which always had its effect with the Bald Cat—that is, in a man. In girls she could not abide it. She cut their lovelocks to the bristle with her own hand, and added an extra six inches to their poke bonnets if their eyes sparkled. But not to mine. For though she had been bidden to be strict with me in the matter of discipline, yet for all that, I was still a Princess in my

own country, and the daughter of one Duke of Touraine and the sister of another.

But the Bull—the Papal Bull!

The Bald Cat took it, fumbling meanwhile for the pieces of Venice glass set together in an oval frame with water between them, by means of which it pleased her to think that she could read. But all the glasses in the world—no, not Agrippa's ball of crystal itself, could have taught her to read that Papal Bull. It was in Latin, and so after turning it this way and that, she gave it back to the Abbot Laurence, who now stood before her, tall and young and fair to look upon.

"Read it, if you please, your learned Reverency!" she said, softly for her.

But Laurence, with a proud gesture, which amounted almost to contempt, handed it to the almoner of the Convent, Father Pierre Bartentane, called Gigot from his shape—this, by us ill-behaved girls.

"Let the Lady Abbess hear what says the Holy Father!" he said. "As I am come to carry off her fairest flower, I wish her to understand that I do not misconstrue my warrant!"

I leaped towards Larry, and would have hugged him in my arms.

"Am I indeed quit of this for ever and a day?" I cried in our own Scots, which I knew that none of the others could understand.

"Am I to go away with you? Tell me quick!"

"Aye," said Laurence, turning away his eyes, "you are to go with me. But—I am to take you to marry your cousin William—my Lord Earl of Douglas."

"The Man of Iron!" I said.

And I think I made a wry face and shrugged my shoulders—for I was but young and knew no better. "I had rather it had been yourself I was to wed, Larry," I said. "And that in spite of your clerkery!"

His face reddened till it became almost scarlet. But he did not look at me as he replied.

"My clerkhood would not stand in my way, God wot—if that were all," he answered, "but my lady, I do not

forget that I am but a poor man's son, and my princess's very humble servant."

Now, all this about young Laurence McKim being Abbot of beautiful Dulce Cor, and yet no whit a monk (save that he could sing like an angel), may sound strange to ears accustomed to authority episcopal and papal, to monasteries French and Italian. But in Galloway we Douglases minded not the King of Scots at all, wet day or dry day, and the Pope only when we had need of him—generally to give us leave to marry within the prescribed degrees, for the sake of the Douglas properties, family tree, and such-like. At other times we of the Southern House did much as we liked, in the Church as in the State, our yea being yea, and our nay, nay.

Now, the Douglases of the Red grew great, and are to this day great and high, by reason of truckling and fawning on the King and the Stewarts. But the Douglases of the Black—never! All except my Lord James, that is, and he never could help trying to please all that came his way, man and woman, gentle and simple. For he was ruddy as young David, the shepherd boy that became a king, tall, too, like a god; and my heart—went after him. Ah! but enough of this. The time to tell these things is not yet. All the same, James was always at heart, as in his person, a Douglas of the Red. For me, I am Black of the Black.

It was, of course, impossible that all the great train of honour and of defence which William Douglas, my cousin, had given to the Abbot Laurence to travel to Rome withal should find lodging within the walls of the convent of St. Brigida. Indeed, as these (barring the churchmen) were exclusively soldiers, and dashing blades most of them, it was perhaps as well, or certain variations in the Rule of that most excellent founder might have been introduced.

So it fell out exceedingly *à propos*. While the Bald Cat was hesitating what she should do, hemming and hawing hither and thither, trying to grant and not to grant at the same time, as was her bald-cattish way,

there appeared from the midst of the retinue a man in an ample "pelicon," or pelisse, longer than was then in vogue, but with a rich under-garnishing of fur. This garment had a wide rolling collar, all covered over with the Bloody Heart of the Douglases, and a great "bar sinister" of threaded gold crossed the mantle from shoulder to its deepest fold, as if it had been a heraldic shield hung upon an altar.

The newcomer was a man of about fifty, quickly greying, and with a mouth that pouted continually like that of a pettish, changeable woman. His long hose were of silk, in what I afterwards found was the height of the fashion at Paris—one leg and thigh being covered with pale blush rose-colour and the other tucked out in clear greenish white, like that which one sometimes sees behind a windy sunset, far in the deeps of the sky.

The man was indeed a marvel to behold, and at the sight of him the High Lady Superior ordered all her *pensionnaires*, especially the two kittenish French girls, back to their cells. But in the circumstances, of course, she was forced to permit me to remain. I should not have obeyed in any case. I would have shaken the Papal Bull in her face.

"My lady," he said, "I am Paul Herault de Douglas, Sieur de Cheverney. Permit me, Madame the Superior, to kiss your fair and devoted hand!"

The haughty expression which had distinguished the Mother Superior swiftly gave place to another—one of almost fearful anticipation.

"Ah," she said, "then you are our over-lord of Cour Cheverney, the Seignior and civil protector of this blessed house of religion?"

"I fear I have but ill done my duty," said the Sieur Paul, smiling and pouting, "I have wasted my time, lingering so long in Paris, in the train of the King, helping to drive out the English, and also employed in other ways. I have somewhat neglected my property of Cheverney—more especially in so far as concerns my duty to you, and to this noble and beautiful establishment!"

"AND AGAIN HE BOWED AND KISSED THE HANDS OF THE LADY SUPERIOR"

And again he bowed and kissed the hand of the Lady Superior.

"A beautiful hand and one more fit for a king's court than——!"

He stopped, and believe it who will (the sisters in the convent would not) the Bald Cat lifted her forefinger and waggled it at him, right well pleased, smiling the while like a fox at a barnyard pullet.

"Ah, naughty," she murmured coaxingly, "these are indeed the manners of a court. But in Touraine we are accustomed to plainer things, are we not, sister Margaret?"

And she turned to me as she spoke. But I had suffered too much already, and was in no mood to be gracious at the eleventh hour.

"Indeed," said I, "I am no sister, either of yours or of the Order of St. Bridget. Call in Sister Eulalie with her bread-and-water, if you like—she will tell you. I am on my way to be married to the greatest lord in all Scotland, and, besides, I am a princess in my own right!"

It was not, perhaps, very ladylike, though I have heard worse things said by much greater and wiser people. But then no more can bread-and-water for four days be called "ladylike." If girls of eighteen are to be treated like galley-knaves—God wot, somebody has to pay for it in the end.

Yet I was no little ashamed when the Lady Superior took my ill-nature with great quietude, passing it over as the mere naughtiness of a child, as yet irresponsible—and so (I grant it) showing herself of the better breeding.

Then the Sieur Paul, advancing the rose-blush leg out of his armorial mantle (or as we women say pelisse), invited me to consider his Castle of Cour Cheverney my home till such time as I should be ready to set out upon my journey to Scotland, there to wed with my cousin William—my Lord High Buckram-and-Iron, as I had already named him in my heart.

Indeed, the phrase, which I thought happily invented,

passed my lips that very night after we had departed for Cour Cheverney. I was speaking to Laurence at the time. But to my surprise and vexation he rebuked me for it, saying that William of Avondale was worth all the rest of the family put together—all, that is, who had been left on the earth after the Black Dinner which Chancellor Crichton, the fox, and Tutor Livingston, the Queen Mother's fat spaniel, had given my brothers William and David within the Castle of Edinburgh.

And at this rebuke I shrugged my shoulders and pouted, like the spoilt child I was at that time. God wot, I learned to behave better afterwards.

"Well, since it must be—so must it be!" I said sighing, "but (I say it twice) I had rather have wedded with yourself, Larry!"

He turned on me, white this time, not red—yes, blue-white as the little shadows that sunshine makes behind snow-wreaths. (Oh, I love to see a man moved like that.)

"For God's sake, girl, have ye no pity?" he cried, putting his hand to his brow—a gesture which his father also had when perplexed—"if ye say the like again, I will ——I will——!"

"Aye, and what will ye do then?" said I, mocking his Galloway accent, which showed itself whenever he was excited. "Will ye refuse me your reverence's blessing? Na, surely never! Or aiblins would ye smite a poor lass, that never did ye harm, with the Greater Excommunication?"

Larry turned away without speaking, and that made me a little sorry. But ah, the inward happiness to be among men again after two years! Yet even then I did not know the power which had come to me during these years, nor yet the good that all the greyhound fare of the convent had done me. In a word, I was just beginning to learn what I could do with the hearts of men.

And there is nothing like that to a woman! In her heart, carefully covered over, maybe—to be dug for deep and long, but still there—indisputable, unobtrusive,

there is the same desire to everyone of womankind. Bah—they tell you different, some of them, but they lie. To be beautiful and to turn men between their fingers this way and that, as a potter doth a vessel, moulding it to his thought. That is the Thing Desired of the Heart —the princesshood, the queen's sceptre. All else, as I, who have tried all, do know—housewifery, maternity, charity, the life conventual, the chatter of a court, the mistressing of a great house—are, as the folk say in Galloway, but a "do-no-better"! And, indeed, among such men as I have known—Douglases of the Black and of the Red, Stewarts with the bitter, murderous Bruce blood in them—what better can a woman do?

Well, it is past for me now, and yet I can warm my heart at the fires of the past—yea, to this very day I chew the pleasant cud of memory. It was not all dust and ashes, as the priests say; it has not all turned to apples of Sodom, and the taste is not as of bitter ashes in my mouth. Still, even in old age, I judge that this is the second best thing which can happen to a woman—that she should have been beautiful in her youth, or, at least, by some quirk or trick of tongue or face or manner, witching, and capable of making herself desired.

I say that is the *second* best thing in a woman's life. The absolute best, the gold centre of all, is that during her love time she should have known one man good, and true, and great. Then only can she wholly forget self in another, which is a woman's heaven of heavens.

CHAPTER III

COUR CHEVERNEY

So to Cour Cheverney we went, the fat-faced goodman with the pouting lips and the unsteady Florentine eyes leading the way. The fields, how fine they smelt—hawthorn, red and white, single-flower and double-flower, on every tree! The hedgerows—as in the Galloway of my childhood, there are hedgerows in Touraine—full of red pimpernel and blue hyacinth, and with the yellow broom they named the kings after peeping over everywhere, while stone-chats, ox-eyes, and other small birds went swaying on the thin fishing-rod branches.

Ah, it was greatly good! Better still, to see the white convent walls that had held me so long sink behind the tall trees, which shut in also Sister Eulalie and her bread-and-water. To Cour Cheverney—yes, we were going. At the risk of I know not what dread penalty, I had looked across at the tall tower, a cliff of masonwork, higher than Thrieve by a score of feet, though not so massive and square in shape, from the perilous top of the gardener's ladder.

Now I was to see it nearer at hand. The Abbot Laurence, in the pride of his ambassadorial office, rode beside the Mother Superior, while the Sieur Paul smiled over his shoulder at them both. It may be well understood that I was on the other side of Laurence on my pony, Varlet. Now Varlet was specially wicked and restive, because he had been most insufficiently exercised by Monsieur the Almoner of the Convent. For the Abbé Berré, our good father confessor, was not a little afraid of Varlet's hoofs and teeth. But as for me, I had no fear, and I specially wished to know all that Larry had to tell, before we arrived at Cour Cheverney. For I did not know how we might be lodged there, nor what

chance there would be of my having speech with my ancient playmate in that great place.

"Tell me first how all goes at home," I bade him; "they have settled you as Abbot comfortably at Sweetheart Abbey—so much I know. None shall vex you there. So at least I bade them, and so Cousin Will promised!"

For I, too, could make myself great upon occasion.

"Oh, well enough," he said, a little indifferently. Then, recollecting who had given him his preferment, he added quickly, "And indeed I am grateful, since no better may be. But the sword and not the psalm-book was my proper calling."

"Time was when you were of the contrary opinion," I said; "tell me—for once I will confess you—who is she?"

But he denied. There was nothing and no one.

"Nevertheless," said he, "a man may sometimes lift his eyes and see the moon!"

"Yes," I retorted on him, fast as words can follow words, "true, but only a baby will cry for it!"

"Then I am, I fear me, a gross pagan," he said as swiftly, "for I worship her!"

"That is bad," I said, "and most inconsistent in a man who must spend his life in swaddling and wet-nursing two-score such sturdy Endymions as the fathers of Dulce Cor. How do you manage it? The Slave of the Lamp could not serve them all!"

"Oh, easily enough," Laurence made answer; "I am (let us say) Abbot of Sweetheart. So far, well—but again better, I might have been the captain of a company, a soldier with men-at-arms under him, like Sholto, my brother—Sir Sholto, if you please, with his little regiment of five children! Still there remains to me the Abbey of Sweetheart. From chapel to refectory, from dormitory to pantler's cellarage, I conceive it as a barracks. The soldiers therein observe the Order of Citeaux, and, indeed, not St. Bernard himself could be firmer or stricter—in all, that is, which concerns the keeping of that Rule by others. But for myself—well, there

are monks who, as it were, are eunuchs for the Kingdom's sake. But for myself—no! I am only one set in authority over monks. You complain of bread-and-water at St. Brigida's, but at Sweetheart, my dear lady, I can do no more and better, and no man raise his voice to pipe a "What dost thou?"

I changed the subject, for the grey towers of Cour Cheverney grew nearer apace.

"And what of William and James—and the lads? Are they at Thrieve? Tell me!"

For I could not bring myself to speak of my cousin William, as Earl of Douglas—at least not yet, still less as my husband!

Laurence gave a little hitch to his mule's bridle. Of white leathern thongs, it was, curiously plaited. Then he bent over to the side away from me, as if something there claimed his attention. Ever since his arrival he had had these strange habits. I had not observed them in him before; but perhaps that was because I was growing older, and so noticed more. So I thought, at any rate.

Then Larry pointed to the soaring keep and the grey flanking towers of the Cour Cheverney.[1]

"Yonder," he said, with a little bitter smile which I understood not then; "they are both yonder, my Lord William and my Lord James.. Do you think that a young wooer hot upon his love-making, and the brother, the friend of the bridegroom, he who is to stand by and see his joy, will be far away when the bride is brought home?"

Then a sudden terror seized me.

"I will not be married like this, here and now," I cried; "signed for, taken from custody, guarded, delivered, and the note acquitted—I, Margaret Douglas, that am Princess of Galloway, and but eighteen years of age!"

And without a word more I set spurs in Varlet, and

[1] Let none go to look for them! The present Château of Cheverney is altogether modern—Versailles in a nutshell, while every trace of the ancient strength has passed away.

turned him about towards the woods. The King was at Amboise—Charles, the King of France, I mean. He would do me justice. He would make me a maid-of-honour in his court. That would be easy. There was great need of such. I had heard the Bald Cat say so more than once—Sister Eulalie too!

Then what a dance I led that cavalcade. I laugh now when I think of it. Off his saddle Larry could have caught me easily, having the gift of the fleet foot. Aye, I will wager if he had been in training, and in his hose and jerkin, he could have winded even Varlet over a long course. But, as it was, he sat there grinning impotently on a churchman's mule. He was full of the good beef and wine of Devorgilla's Abbey—though indeed neither showed in his profile, fine as that of a graven statue. Worst of all, he was swathed in bandages ecclesiastical, cope and soutane and mantle, or whatever these half-men please to call them.

As for me, I made a good start, and went through the cavalcade like an arrow from a bow.

Inwardly laughing, I could hear the din of pursuit thin out and grow silent behind me, as I urged Varlet onward faster and always faster. It is easy to get away from a lot of monks and a few knights and esquires heavily clad in armour—that is, with a good horse between one's knees and a well-pointed spur of silver on either heel.

Amboise it was I was bound for—nothing less. I did not know the way to Amboise very exactly, but I had heard that it lay away to the west, down the valley, and someone had told me that by hard riding one could reach it by nightfall. The king would be glad to see me—of that I made no doubt. And in so much, at least, I made no mistake.

But as I galloped on my spirits rose at leaving Will of Avondale, my cousin, behind, together with the hateful thought of being dragged from a convent only to be married. I was not really dragged, but no matter—that was the way I liked to think about it then.

And I thought also, that if I could only have gone back to play with Larry about the braes of Boreland, crossing

over in a boat from the Thrieve when it pleased us, I should have been perfectly happy. I did not want to be married, at least not so soon, and have done with girlhood before I had ever tasted it, and—and—well, not to have my own choosing of a husband, as Maud Lindsay had when she married Sholto. Even if I could have had the pick of the Avondale brothers, all set out in a row—William, James, Archibald, Hugh, and little John—that would not have seemed so bad. At least, it would have been fun to see them. Then I might not have run off like this. But to marry a sober-sides like William Douglas, whom everyone (of the Douglas faction) said was the best and wisest person in the world, and who looked as if he stuffed himself with smithy filings, wore buckram next his skin, and went to bed in complete armour with his head pillowed on the family tree! *Ciel!* How I gritted my teeth, set my heels into Varlet, and longed for the towers of Amboise to rise above the dwarf aspens and pollard poplars by the brook-sides, which seam all sweet Touraine as the Garden of France slopes gently to the Loire—like some gracious woman lying asleep, and smiling in a pleasant dream.

But the valley, which at first had been but as a dimple on a smooth fair skin—deepened into a lirk between two hills, narrowed into a gorge, and then—in a moment I came upon the little river (called the Cosson), which for a long distance runs a race with the Loire ere it decides to join forces with it. Had I mounted the brae again and kept the crown of the land, I had gotten easily enough to Ambroise (though the way was far), but in my ears I seemed to hear the shouting of the enemy behind me—of my pursuers, I mean. And there, on the other hand, was the water lying green and deep beneath me.

Howsomever I was on the point of riding Varlet at it on the chance that he could swim (and, indeed, the feat itself is no great matter), when all of a sudden there burst a young man out of some green bracken and elderberry bushes by the bank of the river.

He was a tall, ruddy youth of weight and brawn, with

eyes constantly laughing, and as he came, methought I caught a glimpse of something white—the flutter of a neckerchief or a kilted petticoat belike, in the thicket out of which he came.

He ran alongside Varlet for a step or two, calling names to him (speaking all the while like one who has a way with horses and women). Then with a short, sharp grasp at the bridle, he brought him up all panting upon the very brink of the river.

Then the splendid young man took off his bonnet, which was of blue, light and clear, and had a white band and tassel. A white plume of some foreign bird was set in the side.

"I am happy, most happy to serve you, most noble young lady!" he said in French that was a little tashed with disuse, yet which had obviously proved sufficient for its owner's purposes, as witness that flutter of jupe among the bracken. But as for me, I answered him in Scots. For I knew him at the first glint. They do not breed such acreages of flesh and bone, nor yet cover them with such milk-white skin, in the land of France.

"Jamie, lad, my guid cozin," I cried, "gang back an' finish oot your half-cut rig! Or ye will keep a grudge again puir wee Marget a' the days o' your life!"

He stood still, fastened with embarrassment, and then threw up his hands with a long whistle.

"The Fair Maid o' Galloway!" he said, as if stiff-stricken. "Certes, lass, but ye are grown indeed—and bonny as the day. Gie your kinsman a kiss for stopping that reckless galloper o' yours at the peril o' his neck!"

But though at another time—well—I had been glad enough to kiss Larry (and he not my cousin, but a plain blacksmith's son), I refused him.

"Na, na, Jamie Douglas," I cried daffingly. "Gang back yonder where ye cam frae. Ye will conquest mair than the braw French tongue, I am thinkin'! Fish and cranes and wild fowl bide in the marshes, I hae heard, and I ken ye were aye a braw sportsman. But as for the cozinly kiss—let me gie ye ae advice. And that is:

Never ye mix the white wine and the black, lad! They gang na weel thegither, Jamie, my coz!"

And with that I turned and left him, standing "finger in his mouth," as we say in Scotland. I even heard him mutter, "The besom! Hath she learned the like o' that in a convent of nuns?"

Then because James never wasted anything (his one virtue!) I judge that he took my advice. For he went slowly back towards the thicket whence he had come, with his head bent meditatively upon the ground.

But ere he went out of sight, I stood up in my stirrups and called out to him, "Tell me, cozin, where left you William?"

"What William?" said he, growling rather than speaking over his shoulder.

"Why," cried I, "since when was there more than one William—Will Douglas, that was once Will of Avondale, and—my affianced husband?"

I fancy I made him wince at that, even as Larry had done. And I meant to. I always knew which men of those who came near me—that is, three out of four—would not like to hear of my marrying anyone else. And so, in spite of flags of truce fluttering from among elder thickets, I knew very well it was with James.

"How should I ken where he bides," he growled. "I have not a string tied to our Will's tail!"

"No, nor to your own!" I called back to him; "you rake the country overmuch, James!"

In which I had him at a vantage, for he answered me no more, seeming (as we say both in Scots and French) sore "fashed" with me for my free handling of his peccadilloes.

But I turned my horse's head and would have ridden after him.

"Where is Will?" I cried. "Tell me—or——"

I pointed with my hand to the boskage, turning at the same time my horse's head.

"You are a shameless little vixen," he cried (I am not sure that he did not say "villain"). "I know not where Will is—he is not at Cour Cheverney, but where he may

be found, by St. Brice, I know not—making himself musty over parchments, and chilling of his blood by drinking cold well-water, I warrant him."

"Ah, James," I answered him, as I turned away to meet Larry, who, meantime, was in a perfect fume of anger, and the Sieur Paul, wholly out of breath, "I am not sure that elderberry wine, taken in quantity and by the wayside, is so muckle better for the health. It sours upon the stomach, my good cozin James!"

CHAPTER IV

A GOOD FIGHT

Now, ever since I could run alone I have always tried to find out everything for myself, and to put my spoon into every dish, the like of which I had never seen before. So, having easily passed off my escapade upon the friskiness of Varlet, and his having had no exercise for weeks at the convent, only Larry, who did not matter at all, understanding, I was resolved to make the most of our stay at Cour Cheverney.

I had seen greater things before, of course; for mine own home of Castle Thrieve yields to none in all the kingdoms where I have been, and I could recall, though dimly, those great days when my dear brother William held his tourney on the mead of Glenlochar, the one that lasted three days—ah, there never was aught finer than that in France—no, nor yet in Italy.

But, then, at that time I was a little girl, scarce fit to hold the train of the Queen of Beauty, and Maud Lindsay it was who had all the honours and all the eye-glancings of the younger men. But now that has changed, and I felt for the first time, I know not how, that I could hold my own with a king's daughter.

Moreover, Cour Cheverney was still empty of my bridegroom. That was its chief joy. I had an unexpected respite. As Margaret of Galloway I could laugh at Will of Avondale, my cousin, at his books and parchments, the great schemes in his head, and the little outcome there had been of them; but as my bridegroom, my husband, my master, the Earl of Douglas, the Duke of Touraine, I was not so sure that cousin Will would be such a laughing matter.

So, for the present, Cour Cheverney, even with the presence of the Lady Superior, was to me highly desir-

able: a means of furthering my education, and, by incident, that of several other people as well.

And my chief joy and safety, in thus completing of my education, was that everyone knew that I was so soon to be married—by high pontifical dispensation, Papal Bull, holy cord, and four pounds of wax thereto attached—not to speak, as it were, of bell, book, and candle. So they might sigh, the men of them, that is—but no one could think (no, not for a moment) that I meant any harm. Indeed, I never did, and said so frequently when the harm came.

Now Cour Cheverney was of itself a pleasant place. The Sieur Paul, a rich man, had recently had it put in repair. The chambers he had decorated with tapestry from Paris. The higher windows were widened, and balconies thrust out from the thickness of the wall. The courtyard was set about with a bordering of flowers. Bravest of all was a great Judas tree, with purple blossoms close set upon its branches, which cast a shade along the left side of the Court, opposite to the great hall and the men's apartments. I asked the Sieur Paul to have a bench put there, and I went often to that place of a sunny afternoon with my broidery—to be quiet and think.

But the strange thing was that I scarcely got five minutes of meditation, and as for the solitude which I had come there to seek—why, first came one and then another, my faith, past believing! The place was like a fair.

There was Laurence, who, being a prelate, or, at least, having the powers of one, could not go a-hunting. Yet, because I said once, to try him, that he was of no more use than to bide at home with the maids, he took to fishing, and made infinite work with his tackle, sitting beside me on that same seat. I never heard whether he landed anything—from the river, I mean. At the seat he certainly did not. So I mourned with him over his ill success, and when James Douglas came down in yet another new purple vest, with gold buttons and long sleeves of silk, I told him of the little progress that Larry was making in the art of fishing with the angle, inno-

cently inquiring if he did not think that with a rod of elder and a busking of white jupon, our fisherman might try the banks of the Closson with better success.

"These French troutlets are shy. They have been tried so often before," I said. "You can ask my Lord James as to the bait he is wont to use!"

Then Larry, knowing that James and I had some secret between us, would grow all of a sulk, and, bundling his things together, take leave of us upon the instant. At which James, making a little face behind his back, would sit down beside me, while the Sieur Paul went a-promenading along the other side of the court with the Bald Cat upon his arm. She had discovered that on the maternal side he could claim to be a cousin ten times removed (if not more) of her family. And as he was also kin to the great, and possessed a castle like Cour Cheverney, the wise Mother Superior had no objections to the alliance, in spite of the "bar sinister" which, like an oriflamme, he flaunted athwart his back.

It was one of the most frequent of our ploys to dance in the courtyard of an evening. James could not dance well. He was too big of bone, and too fair. Only dark men dance well. But he would snatch angrily at the strings of his doublet and kick at the house dogs as they slunk uneasily along the selvage of the flagged square, apprehensive of so many heels all going to a measure. Then he would affirm loudly that, thank heaven, only fools and cropped poodles could dance, that as for himself the "deil may care, but he, James Douglas, cared no jot!"

All which was, as one might say, meat to the hungry. And specially to me who had been two long years in a convent, with Sister Eulalie tugging all the time at the tail of one's gown! Well, I have heard speak a great deal of Paradise. And it may all be true. But at eighteen one does not hunger after such doubtful exchanges. Cour Cheverney and the dance beneath the Judas tree were good enough for me.

Then Larry, who had a vast amount of music in his fingers as well as in his toes, and could play any instru-

ment from an organ to a five-stringed *guiterne* or a mouth flute—by sheer wit, as it were and without learning, used to play for us. At first it was all solemn-sounding tunes on the great harp—after which, perhaps, low sweet harmonies on the *psalterion*. Then, as he warmed to his work, I, who knew him and saw the ichor mounting, would hand him a viol silently and hush the company with my hand. For, if left alone, they were bound to hear a marvellous thing.

Then would he sing, accompanying himself, like the carolling lark on the first day of May, in such a voice as never was heard save in the sky, till he would bring the very tears to our eyes, and set us to the sobbing for no reason at all. Songs of lost love he would sing, of desolate low shores and maids yet more desolate. Sadder and sadder the ballad would grow, till, with a sudden fling of the elbow through his embroidered robe, Larry would dash into some mirthful lilt of old Scottish song, all marriage-making and happiness, with white-mutched crones nodding heads at their gossip, and goodmen chaffering in the market-place.

As he played he grew fixed and lost, this daft Larry of ours, whom fate and the Douglases had made an abbot, and the ambassador of another man's wooing. And though there was a shaven patch the size of a clipped ducat on his crown, I wot well the curls clustered so fair and maidenly about his brow, that, had he not worn breeches (or whatever holy men wear underneath their soutanes) the Bald Cat would have had them shorn by the roots in the twinkling of an eye.

Then, of course, at Cour Cheverney, there were other exploits. Great brawny James was all for the tourneying, and (also of course) at that, among the country lords and Knights-of-the-Green-Fields, easily bore the gree. But Bevis Roland, the renegade Englishman, as easily beat him at the archery, which at least was exceedingly good for our brisk Jamie's soul. But again at riding and hunting and also at the horse-leaping, my Lord James Douglas could give a long start to all the company—an it were not Larry, who, being a clerk on a white mule,

a cross on his breast, and a mitre on his head, could not for very shame, compete with him. But he stood behind me, gritting his teeth and groaning in his spirit.

"I could beat him," he said, "'fore the Lord I could beat him at all but the jousting. And as for that bag-swagging Englisher, Bevis Roland, I could shoot three in the white to his one, for sixty golden crowns! If I could not, may the devil change me into a kailstock. Yet here I must stand like a draff-sack set upright. God rest my soul for it in the day of need! It is much to put up with for the sake of religion!

Then, the devil he had imprecated entering into me, I encouraged him to cast his robe, his cope and soutane, and to it in his hose and shirt. And by my fey, the mad wight would have done it in a twinkling. He had the heavy mantle half off his shoulder, when suddenly he caught sight of the great golden cross upon it, all wrought in thread as thick as wire.

Then some thought of his calling, as I hope, or shame of the people about him—as I fear—caused Larry to halt, and with a sigh he drew his cope again about him. But when I had egged him on a little further (the devil or one of his imps still possessing me), he turned upon me and said in Scots, "Mistress Meg, art a naughty wench! And if thou dost not mend thy manners, wilt come to no good! I ken what means thy trokings under the Judas tree yonder, thy botched broiderings and sudden eye-liftings, thy seats set in the shade of an afternoon——"

"Concerning which, good lad," I retorted, "you, holy Father Larry, of a certainty ought to know, for you sit there more than any! Aye, and hold thread for the winding, too, between these same thrice-blessed abbatical fingers! *Pax vobiscum! Retro me! Requiescat in pace!*"

And that being all my stock of Latin, I made to bless him backwards in sport, which angered him curiously.

"Ah, that I were your father," he murmured, low and bitter in mine ear, "or your mother, aye—or even the Abbess of St. Brigida two days agone! There are some rules of that Order which would suit you!"

"Well, what would happen then, most reverend prior of the bare chin?" I demanded.

Larry said nothing in words, but his fingers itched visibly to box my ears—or for aught I know, more and worse.

But in the midst of these occupations and the new joyance of freedom which had come to me, the Sieur Paul promised other entertainment. He was, I think, some little piqued that our big James had so easily borne his point against the gentlemen of Touraine. So said he one morning, when we were all at gossip under the Judas tree, "Messire James, my good Lord, there are none of your mettle here, but over yonder at Loches with the Dauphin there are one or two knights of another web—La Hire and the younger Dunois—good lances and stout hearts. How will you like it if I send for them, make a *fête* day at Cour Cheverney, and see if you can break a lance with them as deftly as with us poor laggard oafs of the Provinces?"

"Faith, I would like it greatly," said James, "I ask no better!"

And to me, turning his head, he said in Scots, "Cousin Marget, ye will see me whammle them!" Which is the same as to say that he would make them all bite the dust.

For that was our James, root and branch of him—ready, self-confident, never blate, everyway large, hectoring, easy of manner, quick as a touch to draw on a gentleman, swinge a burgher, or drink pewter for pewter with a beggar. He never dreamed that he could fail in anything. Nor for that matter (to tell the truth), did I!

Well, they came. And I sat on a fine crimson-draped balcony which had been fastened out on struts from two lower windows of the keep. For (having none other) the Sieur Paul had perforce to make me Queen of Beauty, and as for James, he thought, as usual, that he had naught else to do but lift the jewel—a black diamond circled all about with points of brilliants and sapphires—which certainly would have become me excellently. So I hoped he would win.

The company arrived. There were knights on splendid

horses, the like of which I have never seen in Scotland (except the noble black, which had belonged to William, my dear young brother, who was so treacherously slain at Edinburgh by Chancellor Livingston and the sneaking gutter-hound Crichton.

There was Dunois, the younger, a tall, dark man, quiet and lissom, a velvety glitter in the eyes of him like a wandering Egyptian, with La Hire, a smart, grey-headed man of fifty, stout-backed, and with a long upper lip, also with little to say for himself. To them add the Count des Baux and Henri de Cayades, light, alert men of the South, Provençal through all their veins, both born within sight of the castle of good Roi Réné, and both as full of talk and apt to love as a willow bole is of sap in the springtime.

Ultimately to these were added a slight, brown man with shifty eyes, with an ill-kept steel capote on his head, and, believe it who will, a rosary about his neck like the Bald Cat herself; and, last of all, a tall, dark man, of whom, however, I caught but one glimpse disappearing into the stables to arm himself, for he had ridden over light, his armament having been sent from Loches with a groom.

There were banners hung from all the windows of Cour Cheverney and the air of a *fête* day everywhere. The very grooms and varlets of the stable were alert and active, with ribbons in their caps and fresh straws in their mouths.

Outside the newly set-up barriers there was a great press of the commons, with spearmen to tread upon their bare toes with mail-clad feet, and in case of need to stamp out a due and respectful space behind the barriers with the butts of their lances.

Of our house party there came first, of course, James Douglas, my cousin, who must always gallant it in the forefront. Then came the Sieur Paul, most like an apple dumpling done in steel plate and a helmet with plumes, but yet, so they affirmed, able to swing a good sword and grip a stout lance in his day. One of these last only he was to break. Then there was one who, though amongst the party of Cour Cheverney, and fight-

ing in a borrowed suit of plate with the "bar sinister" of Herault de Douglas, had requested that his name should not be made known.

We of Cour Cheverney, being for the most part clerks and squires, had hard work to muster man for man. And, indeed, even with the young man of the Golden Bar, we were two men short, till there rode up another, the dark man I had seen disappearing in the stables. Through his banner-bearer he declared his readiness to fight upon the side of Cour Cheverney—which, when he had ranged himself with James, the Sieur Paul, and the young man of the Bar Sinister, gave us four to their four.

It was a good fight. Dunois and James broke four lances each and still held it even, which was little to the liking or expectation of either at the first shock. The Sieur Paul "keeled" over and lay like an egg of Pasch, fallen on his back, feebly swaying his arms and calling to all and sundry to hasten—that he was being choked in his armour. He had encountered La Hire. And though that stout-backed Samaritan tried to save him all he could, the shock of meeting so famous a lance was doubtless severe. Bar Sinister and our Succouring Knight lent us from the other side, had both conquered their men, without even breaking their own lances, and the grooms were catching the runaway horses and setting the armed men back in the saddle. Towers of glistening metal they looked from my high bank of crimson cloth, and being men of the Midi, they spat out curses at their ill-fortune—the Count des Baux blaming De Cayades for riding across him, and De Cayades telling Des Baux of various places more or less discomfortable, to which an it pleased him he could immediately ride. Whereupon Des Baux said they could settle the matter elsewhere.

Crash went the arms again, and La Hire, having opposed himself to the Succouring Knight who had reinforced the party of Cour Cheverney, overbore him and he went heavily to the ground. On the other hand James succeeded this time with Dunois, and his spear breaking, the brave young Frenchman was soon on the ground, crying with a loud voice, "Praise to St. Denis that my

father is not here to see!" Upon which, James erected his lance as if to conquer Dunois were the simplest thing in the world, and rode again to the top of the lists. The Count des Baux and Henri de Cayades had rushed together upon the Knight of the Bar Sinister, but he, lightly reining his steed, had let them both pass him and crash heavily into each other like two ships in a strong sea, manœuvring too narrowly for the fairway.

A shout arose at his dexterity, and the little shifty-eyed man rushed into the arena and spoke some words to the fallen knights, which seemed to be ill-enough taken.

At last La Hire and James Douglas came to it. They had met once before, and James, solely through self-confidence and lack of caution, had been overthrown. But this time our James made no mistakes. The prize was too high—a ring, a bird, and a kiss from the Queen of Beauty—as it is writ in the poem of chivalry:

"Un cygne qui el pre sera,
Et si vous di qu'il baisera
La pucelle de Landemore——"

La Hire went down before the Douglas brawn and beef and bone. Porridge to breakfast and Martinmas cow to dinner for some score of years had done their work. Truth to tell, La Hire came at it with wonderful finesse, but the weight of man and horse bore him down. After this neither Henri de Cayades nor the Count des Baux was ready for the fray against the conqueror of La Hire and the young Dunois. The Knight of the Bar Sinister had mysteriously disappeared, and James rode round the lists like one vaunting himself, as indeed he never could help doing all his life, specially under the eyes of women. He had taken his new lance, with the pennon which had been carefully kept rolled until now by his standard bearer, and, with a bow in my direction, he gave it to the wind. The "transfixed heart" of the Douglases flapped out bravely, together with the red and gold on his horse's trappings. He set his visor up, and as I told him afterwards, no cock on his own midden-head strutted ever more proudly than James Douglas that day.

Oh, yes; and I liked him for it. It was a great deal to me to know that he loved me, and had done all that for my sake.

But when it came the turn of the victor to receive the chaplet, the swan, and the kiss, James had his headgear removed in his tent and came forth presently, looking tall and personable in a close-fitting suit with a golden tabard back and front. Then, according to custom, the beaten men had to unhelm also and see him receive the prize.

The Sieur Paul led them on, smiling and bowing to all about. He had his head wrapped up in a napkin as if for a deadly wound, but the good-humoured ironic cheering of the populace told that they understood other of it. Then came La Hire and Dunois, looking as if they had swallowed each a tankard of vinegar in lieu of good red wine. Lastly, the two men of the Midi, laughing, chattering, and jesting with an air which said plainly that it would be their turn next time. There was one other, the Succouring Knight, who had taken the side of Cour Cheverney, and after winning once had gone down before La Hire. He came up a little late, and at the very time when I was occupied in setting the chaplet of laurel on the head of the victor. Then, tossing the swan among the commons to be scrambled for, James bent over and took his legal kiss from my lips in the fashion prescribed and established by a hundred courts of love.

Perhaps he was unwontedly long about it. For the next thing I knew was the tall, dark Succouring Knight, he who had obstinately kept his visor down even when he stood among the vanquished, laying his hand upon my arm.

"Margaret!" he said quietly.

And then I knew him for my cousin William, the man with whom I was to wed. I shuddered and caught my breath—as I do now, even as I write.

"And one for me!" he said. "I have come far to get it."

Now I know not what it was that made me perverse that moment. A kiss was nothing, yet I would not.

"No," I said, "it is not your right here in this place, but James's!"

I think he sighed.

"Then a kiss by favour?" he said.

"Nay," I answered, "you must win a tournament first!"

"I will win all Scotland for you," he said. "As for this cracking of lances—it is but hammer-and-anvil play!"

"Ah, but then you cannot do it," I retorted upon him, "and James can!"

And the victor of the combat stood preening himself behind his brother, and, I doubt not, trowing himself the greatest and the strongest man in Christendom.

But William Douglas went away softly without speaking another word.

CHAPTER V

FURRY EARS

AH, these days at Cour Cheverney! How I loved the valley of the Loire and the little feeding rivers which would have been great ones anywhere else, but which shrank to brooklets in the presence of that mighty water going shining down the valley like a procession.

And then, seeing that she could do no more, and, it may be, jealous for the good name of her convent—fearful also of what the kittenish *minettes* of whom she had been put in charge might have done in her absence, the Lady Superior took her departure.

I could have danced! Indeed, I did—borrowing a pike from a yeoman of the Sieur Paul's guard, sticking it in the ground and tying ribbons to it as for a May-pole, till the very men in the lodge 'neath the portcullis laughed, and even William Douglas deigned to smile from the window of the library.

But I must tell about the shabby little man with the ill-brushed clothes and the side-dagger, or *coupe-gorge*, in his belt. I hated him at first, yet withal there was a curious fascination about him.

Not that, indeed, which a man may have for a woman, but something disgustful and hardly full human. I think, if I had been married to such a thing I should have been tempted to use his *coupe-gorge* upon himself—when he was asleep. Then the very way he had of looking at me made me uncomfortable. And he looked long and often.

One day we sat in the pleasant court. The Judas Tree began to throw down its blossoms. A vagrant wind sprang up, making a pleasant birling sound among the leaves above. The little man—" ill-put-on " as we say—was not long in coming across to me. It appeared that he had something particular to say.

"By your leave I will present myself," he said, "since there is none that will do the work for me. I am called Louis de Valois—concerning whom, from his insignificance, you may not have heard!"

"De Valois," said I, somewhat astonished; "why, then, you are of the Royal House?"

"His Majesty's poor relation," he said carelessly, "some kin to royalty—I forget what—if anyone ever knew!"

"What are you doing here?" I asked him, for it was not my way to beat about the bush. "The King has surely not sent *you* also on a mission to Rome?"

A bitter smile wreathed his lips at some thought of his own.

"No," he said slowly, dragging the words as if by force out of him, "nor does he go there himself—though he has much need, aye—all the way upon his knees."

"You mean——?"

"It is not for little girls out of convents to be told what I mean," he said somewhat rudely, yet as if speaking unwillingly. But I had the word for him.

"You mean because he has so badly brought up his son, the Dauphin—whom all the world speaks ill of? Or because of——?"

"Tell me, does all the world speak ill of the Dauphin?" said the little man with the yellow-brown eyes, looking up sharply at me.

"My faith," I said, "I am in France. I cannot abuse the king's son to his own cousin. All cousins, you know, love one another. But, true it is that I have heard in the convent that the Dauphin is a bad man, and that he was right cruel to my kinswoman and countrywoman, Margaret of Scotland."

"As for me," he answered, "I do not believe it. I have, indeed, no great opinion of the man myself, but betwixt a man and a woman wedded, who can judge from the outside of the wall?"

"Well," I answered, "there may be something in that. I myself have heard that she hath a fondness for poets! Now the Dauphin is certainly no poet."

The yellow eyes glimmered with cat-like streaks, like melting snow on a mountain top. The king's poor relation made a chuckling, hollow noise in his throat. He had a sense of humour, a thing highly undesirable in poor relations.

"Ah, belike," he said, "but, at any rate, it is not a predilection which you share, my dear young lady?"

"Oh, poets!" I said to him, "they are doubtless very well in their place——"

"And that place is——?"

"Below the salt and in company with the Merry-Andrew!"

He laughed, and then said, half meditatively, "And you are from the land of the Scots. I wish I had known in time, then I would not have married the daughter of a poet!"

"Your father-in-law was one?" I demanded, really careless whether he answered me or no.

"He was," he answered, "writing English—well or ill I know not. It is a poor trade. Poets die young!"

He thought a while, and then said, "Your father, he was, I judge, no verse maker, nor any great scholar?"

"He could sign his name if you gave him time," I said. "He was the Earl of Douglas and Duke of Touraine!"

"Ah, that is better," he said, his light cat's eyes glinting rapidly over my face, and taking in the least detail of my dress, almost like a jealous woman who thinks you may prove prettier than she, "you have certainly most just views upon poetry and poets. I trust you think better of priests and religion?"

"Have I not come direct from a convent?" I asked him, smiling as demurely as I could, "and, besides, has not the Pope sent a Bull all the way from Rome to enable me to marry a man I have scarce looked upon all my days? Have I not, therefore, cause to think well of holy men?"

"Religion has ever been my safeguard," he said shaking his head gravely at my tone, "particularly this part of the blessed goad wherewith St. Joseph pricked the ass on the

night of the flight into Egypt. It is a relic beyond price and very efficacious. I had it from the shrine of St. Marthe in Provence!"

And he took out of his cap a piece of worm-eaten wood, pointed with iron. The cap was certainly curious in itself, having a peak almost like a mountebank's, with little furry pockets at the sides (though it was summer) exactly as if the wearer had no ears at all! He continued:

"The *curé* of St. Marthe had it from a pilgrim, who gat it directly from a wanderer on the beach at Askelon;" he continued, "it has averted evil from me more than once and brought great harm to my enemies—being (by a most curious device) made hollow, and so arranged as to contain a precious powder!"

We were talking thus when William Douglas came up and saluted the little man with more deference than I had ever seen him pay to anyone in all my life—which, to tell the truth, was not much. Then came James and bowed himself to the ground. But that also meant little. For such was our brave Jamie's way, being, as he said, a younger son with his way to make in the world.

But Laurence stood apart and appeared to meditate. There was an awkward pause. Then the furry-eared little man, who had called himself the king's poor relation, turned sharp upon William Douglas.

"My lord," he said, "if you have no objections, I will take your bride here and the Pope's Bull along with her. You can have mine in exchange. She is a king's daughter."

William Douglas surveyed the speaker with the same gaze, quiet and steady, with which he took in all the world.

"Prince," he answered, "if this be a jest, it is a poor one, and on a subject upon which, as all the world knows, it is ill jesting with a Douglas. We rude Scots do not understand the game as it is played in the palaces and châteaux of France. An evil might therefore easily befall."

"Ah," said the little man sharply, "you should go to

'Amboise and my father would teach you right willingly."

"Is he a poet, too?" I asked, wishing to put a better face on the matter, "as you told me your father-in-law was?"

At this I saw them all start, and James gave a sort of gasp of apprehension. I knew I had said something I ought not. But what it was—or why they were aghast, I declare I knew no more than the Bald Cat—who was by this time snoring in her cell at St. Brigida's.

But the furry-eared man only smiled indulgently, and patted the back of my hand, which I instantly snatched away from him.

"I have had a most interesting conversation with this little lady," he said. "I have not felt the time go so fast for many a day. Nay truly, dear lady, my father is no poet, any more than was thine. Yet he carries about him rather more of the raw material of poets' rhymings than is quite convenient for the world and for me!"

And at this the Sieur Paul laughed with much good humour as at a jest which he alone understood. But the little man with the unwashen face turned upon him with his hand on his dagger.

"Sir," he said, "I am in your house, but had it been elsewhere I should have set this a hand's-breadth deep in your belly for daring to laugh at the King of France!"

I think I felt much sympathy for the small pottle-shaped man who, from a simple desire to please, had crossed the chance tempers of this little impish moldiwort.

"The Dauphin of France!" I cried aloud. "My faith, and I took you for the King's cellarman out for the day, and blinking in the sunshine!"

"But I told you," said he, not at all losing his temper, "that my name was Louis de Valois. Do the maidens of Scotland never put two and two together?"

"Pshaw!" I cried, resolved that at least he should not intimidate me—not if he were the Grand Bashaw of all the Turks, "at home our cat is named Badrons de Douglas, our goat Billy de Douglas. Eight and twenty Crummie Douglases come to Thrieve every Martinmas to

fill the beef tub for the men-at-arms. There are pecks and pecks of Border Douglases, and Ettrick Douglases, and Highland Douglases, and Angus Douglases, and Dalkeith Douglases. There be Douglases of the Red and of the Black—and surely I may be held excused if I knew not that there might not be another Louis de Valois in the world besides the son of the King of France!"

I had very nearly added "And such a king's son!" But I could see James shaping his lips to warn me to have a care, while Will looked on, hard and cold as ever. I thought that he disapproved of my flippancy, and that only made me the more reckless. I would show him that it was somewhat too soon to put on the airs of a husband.

"Will," said I, "marriage begins with love-making. Love-making begins with writing verses. If I am to marry you—if you expect me to love you, go make me some! James there can turn them off by the barrelful—in French or in Scots—carols, ballads, rhymes royal or sermons in verse—he has them all at his finger-ends!"

But Will, my cousin, only smiled tolerantly.

"There is other work in the world than stringing rhymes!" he said. "The Dauphin and I have two lands to win from the Old to the New."

There was always something of the preaching friar about William, which I resented. It sounded like the Almoner of St. Brigida's on Holy Thursday.

So I caught him up sharply. "Aye, Will, is it indeed so? Then let me tell you and his Highness the Dauphin one thing—nay, two. There is one thing, very old, that no one of you shall ever win, and that is a woman's love! Also, one thing, very new, which neither one of you shall ever experience—the love of young children, thrusting their faces into your beards and shouting at your incoming!"

"So?" said William Douglas, his face firm and a little more hard than before. "Well, I can but do my duty. But I will try for the other things too."

And he turned away, leaving me with a question pricking at my heart.

Then came James, in his dark blue velvet and laced

doublet, looking like a great blonde god who had strayed out of some old-time temple. He had heard that which had passed; for he leaned over the great black oak settle and touched my hair gently with his fingers. He had all sorts of ways like that, yet so done that one could not take offence.

"Will is wrong," he said; "but you must forgive him. He is all set on this new-fangled setting of things right in Scotland. He threeps it down our throats that we are all barbarians, and I dare say he speaks truth. He says Scotland—highland, lowland, and borderland—needs one strong man to put down the raiding and rieving and thieving. Furthermore, that James Stewart is not that man. You can guess who is—in my brother Will's esteem!"

I gazed at him in utter surprise. He nodded softly, and like one who makes an assured confidence.

"William Douglas would make himself king—king of Scotland!"

James smiled, and continued to stroke my hair, gently and abstractedly (for the others had gone away, and we were now alone). I did not reprove him; I could not.

"I think so," he murmured. "And you will forgive him, therefore, if he has small time for love and the light concerns of a woman. These may well be left to a younger brother to console him for his meagre portion. God knows, we have little enough to concern ourselves with, poor fellows—save to be barbarians and crack each other's crowns."

But I was not attending to James very much. I was thinking, and with a kind of pride, too—the first I had ever felt in the man who was to be my husband.

"To be king of the Scots," I thought, and from James's consternation, I judge that I spoke aloud, "cousin Will to make himself the king—to be greater than all! That is to be a man and a true Douglas of the Black. Faith, I would marry him now, without Bull or dispensation, without Pope, priest, or marriage-robe—aye, over the tongs if need were!"

After that James was silent for a long time. Above,

there was a constant movement of leaves, and the cawing of jackdaws nesting high up in the crevices of the old towers of Cour Cheverney. I could feel my cousin's breath on my neck. It made me vaguely uneasy, yet somehow I was not able to stir. I did not know I could feel like that. I suppose no woman does till she is tried.

"Yes," he murmured in my ear, "you will marry him, Margaret. But will you love him? Are you sure of that?"

I tried to turn him off the subject.

"Ah," I said, smiling up at him over my shoulder, "that is quite another thing. Surely, when Will is to be a king and I am already a princess, love is a superfluity, a work of—what is it the priests call it—supererogation? Indeed, to begin with, rather an impertinence than otherwise. Yet after all——"

"Well?" said James, erect and waiting for my conclusion.

"Love may come—*after*!" I said. For indeed, so Sister Eulalie had told me, and the girls at St. Brigida's swore to me that their mothers loved their fathers, and this last was certainly a matter to give one on the threshold of marriage a certain confidence. Will, at least, after the dark and "fier" Douglas type, was a handsome man.

Then James bent down, and, though I could not see him, I could feel his presence near me—another strange thing.

"Nay, little one," he murmured in my ear, "I know you! You will love neither the would-be king of Scots, nor yet William, eighth Earl of Douglas, nor yet your cousin Will. You are both of you too Douglas in the bone. One day you will love—yes—but not my brother!"

"Since when have you put on the robe of prophecy, good Master Jacob?" I asked him sharply. "Is it that you would supplant your brother, or take away his birthright, without even the customary equivalent of a mess of pottage?"

James Douglas laughed.

"They have taught you your Scripture well at the convent, I can see," he said. "I knew you would misunderstand me. I was prepared for it. But you will see! Behold, I will try my hand at prophecy again. Will intends to bring the realm of Scotland under his hand. King Jamie-of-the-Fiery-Face is a Stewart, and will die the ill death of all that brood; but he is also a Bruce—that is to say, a murderer from the first. In three years, if I took the king's side in the strife that is bound to come, I, poor despised James Douglas, could be Earl of Douglas in my brother's place. But, by God's truth, I am no Jacob, no supplanter, as you have called me. You will see: there shall not one stand to it more staunchly in the Douglas quarrel than your poor stupid Cousin James, who can only sit a horse, drive a spear, and (he hesitated a moment before adding) make love to the woman he loves with all his heart, without thought or care for peoples, nations, kingships, principalities, or powers, in the heaven above, the earth beneath, or the waters under the earth."

I think I drew a long breath. I felt light as a feather, his lips on the nape of my neck, and, looking upward with a start and a shudder as if someone had trod upon my grave, I saw William Douglas silently pacing the rampart above us, his arms folded on his breast, and a stern expression on his face.

Had he seen, or was he only debating in his mind the chances of his great and final cast—the dicer's throw which was to make or mar—the project which was to him more than love, more than life, and a thousand times more than Margaret Douglas?

I could not tell.

CHAPTER VI

WILLIAM DOUGLAS SPEAKS

UNTIL one day by the little brook which they call the river of Cheverney, William Douglas had never spoken to me of our marriage. But ere we were set out from the castle I knew it was coming. There had been breakfast as usual in the great hall, and much chatter among the ambassador's suite of the wonders they had seen at Rome—Laurence alone brooding apart in silence or only responding in monosyllables when I spoke to him.

But that I wondered not at. For I had a sense of the stage at which the young man found himself. And (it is not a shameful confession for an old woman to make, who has gotten through the world with perhaps more credit than she has deserved) I was glad of it, and in my heart I laughed at his sulks. Of James, who sat and watched me (like a hungry cat, as I told him), I was not so sure. One was never quite sure what James might not do where a woman was concerned. I think even then, I was more than a little afraid of his power over me. I liked the days when he went a-hunting, and yet they were lonely days too.

As for William he had sat talking with the Dauphin, whose shifty eyes, webbed with a spider's criss-cross of fire, like hot metal caked and cracking in the cooling, dwelt ever and anon upon me. How I hated snakes and Dauphins! Ugh! And still do hate!

Nevertheless, through all the hither and thither of their talk concerning Absolute Right, and the Supremacy of one man—the Strong Man, the man with mind, the man who could use all weapons and was ready to employ them —there came to me in wafts and glimpses, through I know not what senses (for a woman has at least a dozen, as compared with men's ordinary five), the knowledge,

net and fixed, that to-day, before it should be the stroke of noon, ere the earliest flowers should droop and close, I should see through a glass darkly into the soul of William Douglas, the man who was to be my husband.

And, indeed, that was all I succeeded in obtaining—then, or for many years after. I see more clearly now. But such seeing comes to women, for the most part, when it is too late.

It was in this fashion that he asked me to walk with him. How differently would James have done it! Even Laurence, poor fellow!

"Dear Cousin Margaret," he began, coming over to me before all the others (figure what his upbringing must have been when, at four-and-twenty—and to all appearance of mind and body ten years older—William Douglas could yet show himself so inept!). Why, a scholar from a priests' day-school had done better—that is, if it had been a French school. I remember—but no, I had begun to tell of my going out to walk in the fields with my cousin William.

August in Galloway, May in Touraine. These are to me the height of earthly beauty, and whatever bliss can proceed from flowers and woods, from sun-speckled riverine paths and breadths of heather lands, across which great whale-backed cloud-shadows drift, lumberingly yet silently, as if they, too, were labouring wains drawn by the white celestial oxen.

It was Laurence, I think, and partly, also, my own liking, which taught me to observe things like that, but mostly—honour to whom honour!—it was Laurence. Not in the least Maud Lindsay, who, indeed, cared more to lift her eyelashes at a well-favoured man than to look upon all the sunsets which had ever been painted athwart the west. Nor yet did I learn the trick from Sholto, who never had a thought except for Maud Lindsay—that is, till the children came, when he became a nursery packhorse, and went on all fours. James Douglas only admired such things because I did, and William not at all, whether or no.

Nevertheless, we went our way, he and I, I, at least, in

no wise keen, nor expecting much pleasure therefrom. So we went by a pretty woodland path within the enclosure of the Sieur Paul, which I had discovered (and in part trodden) during the days I had already spent in Cour Cheverney. Sometimes I took with me Larry, in guise of adviser spiritual, but more often James, my younger cousin. For you see, William was always too busy talking politics with the Dauphin. Indeed, Louis de Valois seemed to have come hither from Loches for no other purpose.

But this day, as I walked by Will's side, I glanced up at his grave, dark-bearded face—the face of a man of forty at the least—and the weight of care that I saw there seemed to communicate itself at once to my heart and my heels. I had on pretty shoes, the same which James, with a forethought beyond most young men, had brought me from Paris. He told me how he had kept one of my old ones all the while as a gage, wearing it on his helm in time of fighting, and in his breast at other seasons. Whereat I retorted upon him that it was well these French shoes had no heels like those of Scotland. Nevertheless, in spite of his sentiment, I suspect some hidden troking with a handmaiden or servant at the convent. For why—otherwise he could never have hit on the right size and shape. But he did and I loved him for it. Or, at least, I felt it was one of the little things that most of all touch a girl's heart, and which not even the bravest or the wisest, or the best of lovers can afford to mislippen. And he who walked by my side was all three. Yet for all that I longed to kilt my coats and run for it, just because he would not look at me and had brought me naught from Paris.

But I can tell you Will Douglas's first words took me by surprise.

"Margaret," he said, "I am to marry you. It is arranged. The family comes first. Neither of us can help it, yet, true it is, in this you have greatly the advantage of me."

"How so?" said I, thinking it to be some matter of my principality, for which I care nothing, all Galloway and

Ettrick thereto never having done me as much good as an orange of Italy!

"Because you do not love me, and—I, William Douglas, have the ill-fortune to love you."

If he had struck me I could not have started back from him in greater amazement.

Surely it was not William Douglas who spoke thus. But even then he did not look once at me. Faith of my heart, what fools these wise men be!

Here was I, a young girl, ready to be loved—nay, plainly eager—and had this solemn dolt only possessed a tithe of James's readiness, all might have been different. We had stopped at the place I had chosen beforehand—yes, and tested. It was a certain sweet privacy of leaves, with a stream running by over clean-shining pebbles, and a green bank to sit upon. I was certainly giving the man all the chances. But poor Will, though such a don at statecraft, had no more craft in the matter of women than the armour of Archibald the Grim set up in the entrance hall of Thrieve.

Now the place had a hundred advantages. Bees of all sorts were humming about. Glossy purple bees, big as hay-wains, blundered and boomed. Business-like honey-bees attended to the matter in hand, like the merchants of St. Giles—furred all over, too, with the golden dust of pollen. Moreover there were little black bees, which appeared always to fly backward, starting angrily with their weapons out like touchy braggards. Then round woolly bees of the size of acorns, and with the rearward part all a fiery red, hustled the others or got up private quarrels on their own accounts among the flowers.

There were so many things Will could have said in such a place, and I sat near him on purpose.

Laurence would have sung a ballad to touch your heart, and that so delicately, the birds would have stopped to listen, and with so accurate and right an ear that the hum of the bees, the ripple of the water, the hush and tremor of the leaves would all have mingled in a fitting accompaniment.

Others, I doubt not, would have done after their kind,

sitting thus alone with a young girl, and, as it were, with the marriage lines in their pocket. Even silence might then ('tis conceivable) have been golden.

But what did William Douglas do? *This.*

Imprimis—he betook himself a foot or two further away from me. I think he meant to give me room to sit at my ease, and began to speak of his hopes and projects. I did not know then that was the greatest compliment he could have paid me.

Yet he never so much as took my hand—though, well, my hand was there for the taking. Of course it was! Since I was to marry him, I thought I might as well make the best of it. Afterwards in Italy I knew a woman who would have had a man knifed for less than Will's present neglect.

"Margaret," he said, "I have brought you here (Oh, but had he?) to show you what I have planned for my future and yours. You bring me as your dower almost a third part of Scotland. I myself possess another third, with about the same proportion of brave hearts to follow our banner from Galloway in the south on through Douglasdale and Marches, northward to Darnaway and Murray."

I nodded, saying only, "Have a care, William, my brother had the like, and yet—in the flower of his age—the cruel slew him treacherously in the Castle of Edinburgh!"

"I remember well," he said. "God rest his soul for a good lad! But then he was young, and I am old——"

At that I laughed aloud.

"At twenty-four years! Verily a patriarch among men!"

"Yes," he answered me, his dark face never once lighting up, "it is true that I am old. I it was who roused the Douglases after my cousin's—your brother's murder. I have lived hard and in haste ever since—not as the young live but as men do who have one business in life, and know not when death may be let loose upon them."

"Then you mean to revenge my brother's death—and little David's?" I asked eagerly.

"Yes, of a certainty, that," he said, "vengeance is a part of it. It shall be done. I shall square accounts with Crichton and Livingston. But, as it were, on the way."

"The way to what?"

"To the kingdom," he said quietly, "the kingdom and the power!"

"You would rebel and kill the King!" I cried, somewhat affrighted at the sound of the words—as was indeed no marvel, seeing that I had just come from listening to nothing more deadly than the all-day cooing of the doves at St. Brigida's.

"By no means," he answered, "though 'tis disputable if I have not at least as good a claim to the throne of Scotland as any Stewart that ever stepped. But let that pass. No, I count not on rebellion. But all the same, rule I must. I shall put down the fox and the sleek poodle—both of them. I will take the King and give him a palace and a garden and (according to his desires) playthings. None of that race is fit to rule. They should have been morris-dancers. God so intended it. No, I will be James Stewart's chancellor, his tutor, his Mayor of the Palace. And then of that realm of Scotland I will make a new thing. Or, by St. Bride of Douglas, I shall die before my time!"

"And why could not my brother William do all this," I said; "he also was brave!"

"I told you," he answered without hesitation, "your brother was too young. He let himself be entrapped. And besides, he had the mistfortune to love a bad woman. *I—love you.*"

Then I took his hand of my own accord, for no woman can listen to words like these without a lump in the throat—that is, from a man true and great.

"And I will try to be a good wife," I said. Very softly, but I think he heard.

At that moment he might have done much with me—perhaps all. I might have been his, soul and body. But William Douglas had not, as we say in Scots, "the airt o't," which is everything (or almost) in the making of

love. And so he went back, like a man reassured, to his weary politics.

"I have talked the matter all over with the Dauphin," he said, his eyes growing dreamy and opaque to the world, "he is in exactly the other case. There is in his kingdom One, great almost as the Douglas in Scotland. The Duke of Burgundy is his Mayor of the Palace, or desires to be. Him he joined for a time, even against his father, that he might learn the secrets of the enemy. For though he has great ideas, that young Louis de Valois, there are lacking to him as much fidelity and constancy as pertain to a tom-cat of the city tiles. But all the same he has more thoughts in his head, this slippery Dauphin, than all the men and women I have met and talked with in any country. He teaches me much—also, perhaps, I him. Each sees in the other what he has to contend against. Both learn from the enemy. For this Dauphin Louis will yet gather to him all the realm of France. See if he does not—and be hated as no man in France has been hated before in the doing of it.

"But, on the other hand, I, William of Douglas, shall do what the Duke of Burgundy might have done with a weaker sovereign. I shall remain a subject, and yet be the king. From the east sea to the west sea I shall stay the robber and the plunderer. The Highland folk will be held in leash. I will make the writ with the king's name upon it run from Kirkmaiden to Cape Wrath. In truth and not alone in proverb, the bracken-bush shall keep the cow."

He paused a while as if meditating. It was, indeed, strange talk for a young girl to hear, and I remember with a smile that only a few days agone, Sister Eulalie had been threatening me with four days' bread-and-water if I disobeyed her. And now the talk I heard was of the discomfiture of princes, and I sat speaking familiarly with men who felt themselves able to hold nations in the hollow of their hands.

Only I wished William Douglas had been a little more human about it. Faith of my body, I would rather have been listening to that muckle cuif James vaunt himself

about the girls who had given him their favours to wear upon his helm.

"Scotland is not a kingdom," Will went on, "it is not subject to one King, but to many. Every pretty lordling does that which is right in his own eyes—hangs on his own gallows-tree, drowns in his own well, burns on his own woodpile, and if the king dares to say 'Yea' or 'Nay,' he will be upon his back in a trice with a pack of old charters as musty and useless as a cadger's ballants, chattering like a magpie all the time.

"Now, with Galloway mine, and Clydesdale and Annandale and the Borders mine, together with the North from Darnaway to Loch Ness, with the King in my hands and the heads of the traitors where such heads should be, what shall hinder but that I shall say to each lord of a peel tower, to each chief of clan or sept—Do justice, and, if you can, love mercy. But at least, attend to the first! For if you do not, by St. Bride, your head I will remove instead, and set it with the others. For be assured, my lords, for once in the land of the Scots you have to do with a man of his word!"

And as I listened to Will, I knew that I was to have a *man* for my husband, and I daresay many women would have loved him as indeed he deserved. But not I. There is in me, somewhere, a spring, like that of a secret drawer, which if a man touch, I will serve him on bended knee all the days of my life and go through fire and water for him! But if not—*not*.

And Will, alas for us both! had not the secret. He felt not the need. For even as he went on talking, his voice filled and shook, and—I could see that he had utterly forgotten my existence. His purpose and work were all to him.

It is the last thing a woman can bear. She would rather be crucified.

CHAPTER VII

A YOUNG MAID'S LOVERS

WELL, at any rate, that was over. I knew what I had to expect. William had said that he loved me. It was possible. Nevertheless the signs were lacking—all, at least that I cared about.

Similarly, it is said to rain sometimes, about once in seven years, in that desert where (travellers say) the pyramids of Egypt look out across a world of sand. But —for me, I prefer a somewhat more human climate. I was fated to marry my cousin Will. He was fated to regenerate Scotland or die in the attempt. Well, so be it! To Egypt I would go. But that would not hinder me from yearning all the same for a land where the gentle rain and the humane dew kept green at once the herb and the heart of woman.

In the meantime I was glad to keep out of William's way. A lifetime of the prophet Ezekiel must have been trying to any woman, and surely every allowance is to be made for the imperfections of his wife. Will saw visions and dreamed dreams, but—I never came into them. I was not even a pawn in the game, though my principality of Galloway was pushed this way and that upon the board. It was hard to bear, and as often as I could I escaped to the bench under the Judas tree—or, better still, to the green bank above the running brook which I had wasted on William, and to which he never returned.

I think I liked the hours best when Laurence made mill-wheels with a knife, and the pair of us stole off a-tiptoe to set them running in the little stream which turned aside towards the Closson, stealing away from the ken of ungentle men, even as we from wars and rumours of war.

Then I was truly happy, happier, indeed, than I was with James, who constantly made me uneasy with his reckless ways—making love, as it were, almost under the very eyes of his brother, in the belief that, as he said, "If you want our Will to notice anything, you must call him to a halt with a naked sword at his breast, and then say, 'My lord, dinner waits!'"

But as for me, I had my idea that William Douglas saw more than our feather-headed Jamie gave him credit for.

So as I say, I was happier with Laurence. Then it was that I became again a little girl as when I used to cry for Maud Lindsay to play with me. Only she never would bide long enough, but would be for ever running up to the knowe-top to spy out for Sholto or some other young man. Nevertheless I had a great yearning to see her again, and bade Laurence tell me all that he knew about her. Which, indeed, was little more than that they all dwelt at Thrieve, where Sholto was captain of the guard and, as ever, the Earl's right hand man. He did not even know the names of Maud's five children—but thought that three were girls and the rest boys—or else the other way about.

Now, by St. Jack of Dover, is there a woman in the world that would have been in the same uncertainty? Aye, would she not have known them, each one by head-mark, their names and ages and dispositions. But men are like that all the world over. It is part of the burden laid on them when they went forth of that Gate before which the sword of fire waves every way.

Laurence used to take off his monastic habit at the entrance of the glade, and in his laced black shoes and hosen, his silken pantaloons to the knee, and tight-fitting blouse buttoned to the neck, he looked (in spite of his abbatical dignity) scarce older than the page-boy who played impish tricks about the Mains of Thrievé, and was whipped for it by Dominie Gilston, my brother's house-chaplain—the same who afterwards married Mary the cook and now keeps a change-house and place of entertainment for travellers in the market-square of Dumfries.

Then he would tell me tales of the adventures he had in France, when Maud Lindsay and I were stolen away by the thrice-accursed De Retz, how Sholto, his father, and my Lord James had gone to seek for me, because Will could not be spared out of Scotland, which at the time was all in an uproar after the murder of my two brothers, William and David, in the Castle of Edinburgh.

He told me, too, of the Lady Sybilla, whose beauty had led my brother to his doom. She had been sorry, he said, when it was too late, and she herself had been made to experience a far deeper and more abiding woe in being yet alive somewhere in this same land of France.

"Ah, that I could meet her," I cried, clenching my hand; "would I not set a knife in her heart, the traitress and murderess!"

At which Larry shook his head and said gently, "Margaret, it is not possible for any human being to judge another, least of all a woman a woman. She was sorely used, poor thing, and it will hurt none if it please God to be good to her in the days to come! May not you also do likewise without any great hurt?"

For there was about Laurence McKim in these days a sweet and pitiful boyishness, and that in spite of his honours more than semi-ecclesiastic. At first I thought that his dissatisfaction with the position was assumed, and upon occasion would venture to rally him upon it.

"You are no right priest," I said, to try him; "but only a *tulchan* abbot, to draw tithe milk for us Douglases —a lay prior! Who ever heard of such a thing? Why, man, you should join the king's bodyguard, and I warrant that in a year you would be an officer; or, better still, our William hath great projects on hand, and will need good men. Come back with us to Thrieve. After James and Sholto, I warrant you there would be no knight like you in all the kingdom!"

"No?" he queried, pleased with my saying that; then, with a quick look. "I thank you, Mistress. At least, I came out of the fight the other day without any dishonour—though, as for me, I get neither kiss nor Christian goose!"

"You were not at the tourneying?" I cried in astonishment, for indeed the idea had never crossed my mind. He smiled softly.

"I wore the Douglas Heart, for my heart is Douglas," he said, "but with the Sieur Paul's Bar Sinister, to show that I had no right to it. But it is a secret which I trust only to you. For, as most men think, it is noways seemly that an Abbot of Dulce Cor should ride a tourney in a borrowed coat."

And with that he would fall to the whittling of his windmills and watermills again, cutting them out with a knife as daintily as cabinet work, or the China art of inlay. But, in spite of this, there was a curious constraint upon us—all the time that we were not playing like two children with puppets and fal-lals. The which was the more remarkable that often then we would talk of the most serious subjects, yet always freely and without reserve.

For instance, Larry would tell me, going on all the time with his enginry, how Chancellor Crichton was the worst and falsest man in all the world, and how, from being a small country laird, without power and without apparent parts, he had raised himself to be the richest and most influential man in Scotland.

"But the Earl William?" I queried, surprised, "what of him?"

Laurence nodded, a little sadly as I thought.

"Yes," he answered, "I have not forgotten. There is no one like him. But he goes to work too straightforwardly to take a serpent in his grasp. A Douglas of the Black is no match for a Crichton, unless he first catch the serpent between the prongs of a forked stick, and then grind his head under heel! If William Douglas were to take my advice, he would gather together all the south, besiege Crichton the Fox in his own castle, having taken him and it, hang him high over the topmost battlement, and set the place on fire. It were a fine counter roast to the Black Dinner of Edinburgh!"

I could not but laugh.

"Certes that is very well said for a man of peace,

Laurence," I cried, teasing him. "Assuredly if that was the way you spoke to the Pope in Rome, it is a great marvel that his holiness did not make you a cardinal!"

But he gave little heed to my words, thinking solely of the terrible days when my two brothers were put down before all Scotland.

"Ah," he said, "you were then too young to remember. But we—we that were of the Douglases, who saw them ride gaily through that gate, with the Black Bull already killed for their funeral feast, we have neither forgotten nor forgiven—be we knight or knave, cottar or churchman, abbot or archer!"

"No," said I, "forgotten I have not—no, nor ever will! But you think there is danger that Will, my cousin, may tread the same road. Why then do you not warn him?"

"Warn Will of Avondale!" he laughed a little bitterly, "as well warn the tide-race in the narrows of Solway! When William Douglas is set on a thing he will turn neither for flood nor fire—not for God nor man nor devil!"

"Could a woman turn him, think you?" I said, more for the sake of saying something than because I meant aught of serious import. Yet he took the question mightily soberly.

An expression of the most tender sympathy and gentleness came over all his face—sweet and gracious and yet somehow very pitiful.

"I fear not you, little one!" he said, as if half to himself. "Yes, I fear greatly."

And I suppose that I ought to have been angry with him to address me thus. But it was with him as with Jamie, though in another way. Simply I could not be angry with him. The thing was not in my heart.

Yet it was all different. For Laurence never meant but to be the best and the dearest of comrades. But James —well, ever since I knew him, James could not help making love to mistress or maid. He must fulfil his *métier,* which was that of cadet of a great house. And to tell the truth, the thing was no trouble to him—so far, at least, as I was concerned.

Ah, if men would only permit women to be the simple comrades to them that they wish to be, how easy and how wholesome the world would become!

Also, saith the Wise Man over my shoulder, how short-lived! But of that I did not consider then.

All the same, there are few things dearer to the heart of a woman than the love, simple and inexigent as the budding of a flower, which grows up in the heart of a boy or of one who will all his life remain a boy. Of which last was Laurence McKim. For Larry, older than I in years, yet never reached his majority, though I have seen the white hair fall thick upon his shoulders, and but for a pair of pruning shears he might have been able to tuck his beard into his girdle.

So I leave it to any who have such memories, to bethink them whether sometimes the heart within—or what part soever of a woman is able to call up, to the soul that dwells behind dimmed eyes and wrinkled skin, the very touch of lips velvet-soft and rose-sweet, the thrill of beloved voices long lost to the outward ear, the swift welcoming smile upon faces unseen for thirty years—does not linger upon such days in the greenwood, tuned to the ripple of waters and the hum of bees, when by my side wandered young Laurence who loved me (albeit a clerk), with the purest and most unselfish love which man gives to woman. Yes, I will say it, it *is* the best and purest, that which seeks not its own. But, in all fairness let this be added—it is seldom the kind of love which pleases a woman best or moves her most.

When he had fitted his last cog and pinion, it was wonderful to note how Larry would leap up and cry, "It is done! Let us go together and see it grind the corn!"

And so, hand in hand, we would depart, and (by the love wherewith I have loved those dearest to me I swear it!) never once did he even press my hand, though possibly in my excitement I may have pressed his. I do not know. At any rate, there were elements of pleasure about us somewhere, invisible, like the fairies about a spring.

We would run, I say, to the little stream, and, choosing

a place where the trickle descended easily but not too forcefully, we would arrange the uprights, and set the mill-wheel a-going. Sometimes, also, Larry would carve most cunningly contrived little buckets out of hard wood, the which he fastened to a wheel, while he showed me how to direct a little stream along a banked-up canal so that it would run freely, and make what he called an "overshot" wheel. This, he said, was the best sort, and saved a great deal of water; but as the water was not ours, at any rate, and there was plenty of it, I did not see the mighty saving.

It was pretty to watch him, hastening this way and that, getting his hose wet, his curling hair all of a tangle, his eyes bright, and his cheeks red as those of any young maid waiting at the trysting tree.

I could not help saying to him, though perhaps I ought not, "Larry, you are certainly a most distracting boy. 'Tis a world's pity you are a monk!"

"I am no monk," he cried indignantly. "If I were a monk, would I be here playing with a madcap girl?"

"I do not know," I answered him; "there are other and worse things that you might do. And as to being a madcap girl, *I* never was a holy abbot with a cure of souls, with carp and trout, dace and jack, all in mew for Sunday's dinner! Nor yet did *I* ever put on another man's coat and ride a-tourneying with a Pope's Bull in my pocket! Madcap, indeed! Who may be the madcap now?"

Of course, I only shammed anger, as is the best way with boys—that is, if you want to find out what is in their hearts (which, of course, you ought not to do). With elder and more experienced men, the old-fashioned dropping of salt-water from the eyes is still without a rival. But with boys, and, they say, with those upon the return to a second childhood, anger is a woman's best weapon.

At any rate upon this occasion it was more than enough. Never moorland whaup stricken to the heart by the winged shaft of the archer from behind his decoy bush fell more cleanly than did my poor Laurence.

"Do not be angry," he pleaded piteously. "Indeed I meant no ill. I could not. For I love you—yes, I, who am but a blacksmith's son and half a clerk besides—dare to love you! So that my heart is like to be broke because I see you about to marry a man without loving him, and" (here he paused a long time as if still afraid of my anger), "loving another man without being able to marry him!"

I sprang to my feet, and then indeed I was angry, as anyone may well believe.

"You mean James Douglas!" I cried, taking a step back from him.

Then he answered very gently—wondrously so indeed for a son of Malise McKim. "God forgive me, I would that I could say that I meant mysel!"

CHAPTER VIII

MARGARET OF MARGARETS

AT that I was wroth and with reason. For who could have dreamed of such a thing—except, as I said, one blinded by monkish ignorance or childish jealousy. Yes, I was very angry, and I am glad to pass quickly from the cruel words I spoke to my comrade.

But the truth is, that perhaps it was true that I had been as the ostrich, which (says Leo Africanus) hides its head in a heap of sand to escape the hunter. But it was, indeed, small wonder that I was angry. For nothing touches a woman more than to be reproved for that which, till that moment, she thinks no one but herself has perceived.

"I see it all now," I said, clenching (I am sure, for I always do so) my hands by my side with the arms stiff. "You have learned your lesson well, Sir Priest. William Douglas has set you to spy upon me, has he? Well, go back to him! Carry your tale! There is not much to tell. Faith o' my body, I wish there had been more. 'Tis not the first time that you have been ambassador for your patron. Who knows but he may have some further advancement to give you!"

It was still with the utmost gentleness that Laurence listened, which was the more surprising, considering what a spitfire he had been in earlier days, the days when Sholto and he had flung themselves each on the other like wild cats till separated by their father's waist strap and arm of power, as hath been told elsewhere.

"No," he said, "William Douglas is, indeed, my master and the head of my clan. But you know, Margaret, yes, as well as I, that he has asked nothing, and I have told him nothing. Yet is my heart sore for you, my dear, my dear!"

"You forget to whom you speak!" I said, trying to build the dyke thus. But he would none of it. I had played too long at blindman's-buff with him to stand of a sudden upon my princesshood.

"I do not forget," he said, "I remember—everything. I am the Abbot of Dulce Cor, yet I call you 'my dear.' You yourself it was gave me the office, yet you are 'my dear.' I am the son of your father's armourer—a blacksmith, if you will. Yet, for all that, and even because of all that, you are (I say it again) 'My dear—my dear—my dear!'"

I continued to look at him without speaking, yet no longer angrily, but with a sort of warmth about the heart which, if not love's self, was yet his cousin german. At any rate this was better than Sister Eulalie and the Bald Cat.

Laurence went on, still holding the little mill-wheel between his fingers—I think I see him yet. He kept nervously turning it this way and that, adjusting a bucket held in place with its wooden pin, and firming the axle with care and skill. Yet with the most sorely pained expression on his face, and something like a film of unshed tears behind his eyes. He was sorry for himself, yet he seemed, somehow, tenfold sorrier for me. And indeed, the thought of this dear young lad, who had never loved but me really, helped me many a time in after hours, that of themselves were naught but the blackness of pitchy darkness. It might have been better if I could have followed my impulse of the morrow—but it is false that a woman can do with herself as she will. Nevertheless, it was in nowise his fault. For all that Larry did and said was so sweet and simple and undemanding.

Not at all like—like that other. Yet, perhaps, if Laurence had asked more he might have saved me much, who can tell?

"Ah," he continued, "if only you loved as I would have you love—how safe that would keep you. It is (I, who am half a monk, know it—have seen it) a terrible thing for a woman to marry a man she does not love, whom she never can love!"

"And, pray, Sir Abbot," I cried, "who are you to judge of the likes and dislikes, loves and hates, marryings and givings in marriage of Margaret of Douglas and Galloway? Your breviary and the lives of the holy saints Trophimus and Kentigern would suit you better! Or, perhaps that of St. Anthony might teach the danger of championing damosels in distress."

But all this was thrown away upon the fixity of Laurence McKim's purpose, and changed nothing of the sweet and gentle melancholy with which he spoke. There was no passion in his words or in his speech, as there would have been in James Douglas's—but all pure and child-tender, at times almost maternal. Where had the lad learned the secret? Within and without he was wholly different from the rough-colted boy who had gone forth with my uncle, the Abbot, to learn singing at Sweetheart on the eve of the great tournament on the Lochar braes.

"It is true," he said, "you have every right to flout me. But, all the same, you will never love William Douglas. And, being the girl you are, the last daughter of your race, a Douglas of the Douglases, you must have someone to love. If that one be not a good man—ah, then I see clouds black and terrible rise up before us. And I risk all—your favour, Earl William's favour, my place and rank, which I owe to you—so that when the storm comes you may know that there is one who will love you truly and surely—even as, if they had lived, your brothers would—and in the same fashion."

Then I think that Laurence saw I was not scornful any more, for the tone of his voice grew more cheerful—not glad or amorous, or even hopeful, but as of one who feels neither himself nor his motives any longer misunderstood.

"Half a priest—yes," he said, still with the tone of gentle melancholy which sat so well on him. "But, thank God, not a whole monk. Do not forget that I have been longer alone within that fair abbot's house at the New Abbey, within sound of the vesper bells, than you in the convent of St. Brigida. Yes, and I have been much

lonelier, for I was not meant to be a holy man, according to the acceptation of the Orders. Yet I obey—that is, as far as in me is. But my heart is apart from this thing. To be kindly to all, helpful to as many as possible, to do evil to none, to carry no ill tale and to listen to none. Such things as these I read in four booklets called 'the Holy Gospels.' But that is noways religion according to the Church and the Orders. To pray so often, to eat meat on this day and fish on that, to fast till noon on chicken-broth, to click so many beads, to sing so many hymns, to declare all men outcast and condemned, going before into judgment, unless they can prove themselves properly ear-marked sheep of the churchly pasture, lambs of the monkish fold——!"

"Laurence," I broke in hastily, "in such a case were it not better to cast your abbotship to the winds, to bend bow or lay spear in rest as a knight or yeoman? Nay, to cut wood and draw water like a villein, rather than to abide, practising the things in which you do not believe, chanting songs without a meaning, carrying forth sacraments to mock dying lips?"

He appeared to consider a while.

"There is somewhat in what you say, though, in fact, I do none of these things," thus he answered me. "Also, there is an obverse to the coin. In the first place, at least, I can make of Dulce Cor a clean place as compared with other foundations, a harbourage of peace and right living, a centre of help and kindly brotherhood. For not the Grand Bashaw of the Turks has more absolute power than I in the Cistercian abbey of Sweetheart—so long, that is, as I have the Douglases at my back."

I shook my head in my turn.

"You are keeping something behind that," I said. "Larry, you cannot deceive me. You, a soldier and a brave lad to drive a spear, handsome and young. You should not be content to rule in a monastery, when you could as easily lead five hundred men, all clad in mail, into the shock and turmoil of battle. No, Larry lad, you ever liked your drink heady. Tell me the true reason why you have come down to curds and whey!"

He thought a while and then said, "It is true—there *is* more behind."

"Tell it me, then!" said I.

And I laid my hand upon his arm, looking at him. For one could not help being gracious with Laurence. At least I could not. He never presumed even once—perhaps I should add, "Alas"!

"I have little to live for," he said, "leave me this. I would rather a thousand times spend my life in a cell, than take away the one hope which I hold in the deep places of my heart."

"And that hope is?"

"That one day the White House of the Sisters of Dulce Cor may be a refuge for you—at the storm-breaking, in the day which shall come—yes, surely!"

"But am I not to be the wife of William Douglas, Earl of Galloway and Duke of Touraine? What need shall I have of refuges and convents? I had done with such on the day I left Cour Cheverney yonder!"

"Ah, wait," he made answer, gently as ever, "the great house stands high and the winds bear sore upon it. The tides run strong beneath. But mine is but a little dwelling, set in a green howe, with only a streamlet that runs thereby. And—I am content. At least it shall be kept in readiness for you."

"Then you think that William will not succeed in his great schemes for Scotland—or that he will perish in the doing of them?"

"As to that, there is none who can tell," Laurence answered, "either William of Douglas will be the first man in the land or—his head will go the way of those other two—his cousins!"

"Then," said I, "there is one other of the race who will stand by the chief, and the name of her—Margaret Douglas."

Laurence smiled, yet with something so strange, so far away and sweet in his smile, that I asked him what he meant. For it seemed that I had not yet snatched the whole heart out of the mystery he propounded.

But he would only say, "My Margaret of Margarets,

it is the rule of the Master of All that days run to weeks, that weeks being summed, make the months, and the returning months count the years and the lifetime. That is a long time for a woman of the Douglas race to do without being loved. As for the love with which I love you—it is (I promise you) as the well-water in the Abbey precinct, under the great oak, cool, clear, and—savourless. But you Douglases, man and woman of you, drink of love as one who quenches his thirst in strong wine, goblet after goblet. So it was with your brother, and so it will be with you!"

"Bah," said I, "you preach too much, Laurence McKim! And all your texts are taken from the Song of Solomon—which even clerks ought to read only on high days and holidays. I agree not with your conclusions. I deny your premises. I will none of your reproof. Set up your mill-wheel in the linn, and let us be going!"

CHAPTER IX

THE GARDEN AT AMBOISE

It was the Dauphin who conducted us to Amboise—why, I did not at the time know. And such a way as it proved from Cour Cheverney, past telling of—all along the green river banks, the blossoms of the fruit trees blushing in the sunshine, a pink haze of blown petals, like a morning mist, pearling all across the orchards of Touraine—a sweet thing to see, that high day and holiday of the year. This time we rode quietly and steadily; for Varlet had been exercised of late, and—I had no need to run away from three men who, each according to his possible, loved me, or at least told me that he did. With these about me, I cared little even for the shifty, baleful, yellowish eye of the Dauphin Louis. For (as I thought then), William was his equal in statecraft; James certainly could have cut him in twelve, like the Levite's concubine, with as many strokes of his sword; and as for Larry, Louis de Valois was afraid that, in his quality of Abbot, he would ban him with bell, book, and candle.

So I rode and held myself safe, not knowing of the depth of the creature's guile, and the cruelties which even then were fermenting like yeast in his brain.

As usual, William Douglas and the Dauphin bode together—hard at it, now in fierce debate, now in hushed conference, the miles padding unheeded between their horses' hoofs, and the fair landscape lying all unregarded.

A little behind, Laurence rode with one or two of his ambassador's suite about him, on his white mule; and, save for the wistful eyes he turned upon me whenever I looked his way, one might have thought him happy enough. But, since I knew that by the turn of a finger I could bring him to my side, I stayed with James, who, as usual, was the gayest of all that company.

I think, too, that I was a little revengeful, because of

what Laurence had taken it upon him to say in the wood the day we set the water-mills whirling. After all, though I liked Laurence McKim, and he was of the pleasant of the earth, he had no right to dictate to me what I should say or with whom I should speak.

At any rate, he should learn his lesson, and then, when I had need—why, I could always call him back as one whistles to heel a well-trained dog. So, and because of these things, I rode with James. There were besides several good Scottish knights with us, but, their kindred ignorance of French shutting them in like a cage, they had little to say even to each other—nothing at all to me.

Now, in all that bright land of Touraine, there is no castle (and there are many) so beautiful for situation as that of Amboise. I, who am now an old woman and have lived in these latter days to see vast changes, have seen no vaster change anywhere than in the architecture of the houses in which great folk live.

Now (they tell me) Amboise glistens with round tower and embayed window like a piece of jewellery new coft in St. Mark's Square at Venice. Then, as I mind it, though the residence of the gayest Court in the world, with the King and all his folk flaunting in gold and colours, the castle itself had little of splendour, being an ancient keep with courtyard and flanking towers—not near so fine, indeed, as Cour Cheverney, albeit very much larger. Thick walls, great towers, with low doors therein—no entrance gate half so splendid as that of Thrieve—mighty wastes of masonry, doubtless good against sun and archery, but with slotted windows which made the lower stories like a vault, while to the upper the staircases were so narrow and difficult that scarce two could ascend at one time abreast, all of them after the old fashion, too, twisting and turning in the thickness of the wall.

But as to the setting of this wilderness of stone and lime, never had I seen such a place.

From the great terrace, lo! all fertile Touraine, the Garden of France—which is to say, of the world. Yonder was the green of the river banks, shining emerant through a lawny drift of peach blossom, the clearer hue

of almond, the white wax of cherry and apple—on and on till the distance turned into a land of dream, or some Avalon lost among the clouds of sunset. Beneath, the Loire swung past in a great circle, almost bending back upon itself, and blue as only a river of France can be under the sky of May and Gaul.

In the outer courts and gardens were many courtiers, who saluted the Dauphin with deep reverences. But Louis, striding through the press of them in his apparel of dusty black, his buckleless belt tied with whip-cord, his spurs uncleaned, and narrow-brimmed steel cap which many a gay arquebusier would have scorned to wear, never so much as acknowledged one of their greetings. He passed through a gate which led out of a courtyard into a garden, never pausing till, at a certain iron port, a man in armour stood on guard.

"None must pass within!" the sentry grumbled, frowning and grounding his pike with an air of authority.

But it was fine to see how the Dauphin set him aside, as if he had been a wooden puppet.

"I go to my father," he said; "let me pass this instant!"

And then with an officiousness mightily impressive there came one who, by his chain of office, was a sort of major-domo or chief steward, and he stood before Louis of Valois in all the bravery of gold-worked tabard and silver-hilted sword, the latter shaped like a toothpick and of as much use. He had on his head a broad flat bonnet of purple velvet, which he doffed as he bowed low before his master's son. James, amused and yet no little amazed, regarded him as if he had been a green frog swelling himself to croak.

"The King takes the air," the major-domo said; "will it inconvenience His Highness the Dauphin to wait a moment while his servant announces him to the King?"

"It would inconvence me exceedingly," said the Dauphin, with a sneer, "only the Dauphin of France has no idea of being preceded into his father's presence by—let us say with as little offence as possible—Sir Pandarus of Troy!"

And with that he opened the door with his own hand, and I could see within as through a crevice in a wall.

It was a fine enclosure, laid out with green paths and shady with noble trees, having little fountains that babbled all about. The place was full as it could hold of the lilies of the Virgin, orange and straw-colour and white, jetting up from the green and nodding graciously in the breeze.

James Douglas had stood aside for me to enter first, as my right was. But William Douglas came and caught me by the wrist when I had already set my foot on the threshold. He gripped me almost fiercely, and indeed, even hurt my wrist.

He drew back with some rudeness, saying only, "Let the Dauphin go find his father first. It is ill coming between such a son and such a father!"

Then I sulked a little and pouted, holding out my hand, as a child does with a hurt. Of this William Douglas took no notice at all, but only stood with his back to the garden door. Then came James up, and, taking my wrist between his fingers, pretended to chafe it, murmuring many jesting bairnlinesses—yet with some of the accompaniments of real tenderness as well. Laurence, in deep dudgeon at something, gnawed at his under lip and gloomed at me from afar.

So I could not help laughing at him. I laughed indeed so that, leaving James, I went up to him and said, "If it pleases his Reverency, the Abbot of Dulce Cor, to girn at me like a sheep's head in the tongs, perhaps he would like to "swage the ill himself!"

And I held out the arm and wrist to him, knowing well that in his heart his desire was to kiss it, and that he dared not before so many. It is good to be able to tease a man thus in safety, and yet nobody know of it.

"What was the cause of the misfortune?" he said, suddenly rallying a little as I made to leave him again.

"Methinks," said I, "it was only a certain Bull, that hath taken it upon him to show his horns a little too soon!"

It seemed as if neither William nor Laurence took my

meaning, for both remained fixed and with grave countenances. But with his head thrown back my great outspoken James shouted a laugh to the skies, which the Dauphin must have heard in the garden.

"She is a very vixen-reynard, this one," he said. "She nips shrewdly. Will, my lad, she means the Pope's Bull that you have gotten to marry her! And she twits you that you are not married yet, and have no authority over her impishness!"

"Ah!" said William calmly, without appearing to have heard the explanation of the sorry jest (all jests are sorry when explicated), "here is the Dauphin. Doubtless he comes to bring us to the king, his father."

Now, when I thought of the king of France, Charles, seventh of that name, I took him for a sovereign of power and inches, making men obey him as did Will, my cousin, or able to drive a lance with any man, like James. So I was ill prepared for that which indeed I saw—a man of the middle height, fleshy and otiose, with red-rimmed smallish eyes, full of good humour and slow laughters, which, though most silent, shook him like a jelly. He was walking in a certain alley, the widest of all, under the sparse sprinkling shadow of high lilac bushes. He held by the hand the most beautiful lady and the sweetest to look upon that eyes ever beheld. And I, Margaret Douglas, that have been made mickle of all my life, in mine own country and elsewhere, may, in such a matter, be trusted to tell the truth.

And as the men all uncovered except Laurence (who, being a clerk, only bowed deeply), the king broke into a volley of thick, guttural speech, very rapidly spoken—which, though my ears had been attuned to nothing but French for years, it was still difficult for me to make out.

Charles extended his right hand to be kissed, and one by one all bent and kissed the plump fingers—white, scented, and spanned with rings, like those of any Court dame. But I, having nothing to ask of him and nothing to fear, with great gravity gave him my hand to kiss (an it liked him), whereat he laughed, and the lady by his

side, whose hand he had held all the while, smiled, and nodded at me approvingly.

"Do it!" she bade the King. "If I mistake not, it is a privilege which more than one of these gentlemen present will envy you!"

"Indeed, nay!" I cried. "Why, no more than five minutes ago I offered it to two of them, and——"

But the King, with his hat off, was kissing my hand, while the Dauphin, in whose eyes I caught death and murder, stood glaring at the beautiful lady at his father's side as if he would like to kill her upon the spot.

Then Charles VII. presented us all to her—myself, the Earl of Douglas, my Lord James, his brother, and that holy ecclesiast *in partibus*, Laurence, Abbot of Dulce Cor.

"The Lady Agnes Sorel!" said the King of France, with manifest pride, "sometime Demoiselle de Fromentau, now Comtesse de Penthièvre, and above all" (here he smiled), "Dame de Beauté."

I took my eyes just long enough off that radiant face, full of gentleness and pity, as well as extraordinary beauty, to observe the effect she produced upon my companions. As for me, I had the grace to feel but a schoolgirl beside her. Indeed, I have never been jealous of a woman in my life. It is not my way—nor, indeed, my need. So, I said to myself, "I am but a girl, it is true—but I will grow older. This Dame de Beauté is a woman and will grow old."

The which, alas! she never did, dying to the roar of the wind through the Northern woods she had helped the King to reconquer—the Seine running below brimful, past the ancient abbey of Jumièges, where dwelt the Dauphin of France—this same Louis de Valois, who is sore belied if he knew not in what manner she died.

Well, be that as it may, William stood stock-still, silent, stern, gloomy as a fir wood in November. He made her the reverence which he never refused to any woman, old or young, sinner or saint. And I said to myself, "Here, surely, is the man that will never be touched by the power of woman. Even now, he is thinking of his plans and

plottings!" The which, doubtless, should have been a great comfort to me!

But, as usual, James made up for all. He knelt on one knee and kissed the hand of the Dame de Beauté with such lingering courtesy and lover-like fervour that he well-nigh made me laugh.

Then the King, taking Will suddenly by the arm, perhaps in dudgeon at James's forwardness, marched him off, the Dauphin accompanying them—probably more to listen to their conversation than to attend upon his father from any idea of filial obedience.

We were, therefore, left a party of three. For Laurence and his monks had withdrawn themselves to another part of the garden. It was a festal day, indeed, for our gallant James—with two women, both young and one of them beautiful, to squire here and there among the hawthorn and daffodillies.

He found time, however, while the lady turned to give some directions to her maids, to communicate to me, the name by which Agnes Sorel will be known to the end of time.

"LA BELLE DES BELLES!" he whispered, with his finger on his lip. Yet, knowing James as I did, I think he meant the lady to hear. For James could only be James to the world's end.

CHAPTER X

"LA BELLE DES BELLES"

"WHO may she be, that is so beautiful?" I asked of James.

"She is our Queen's ward—her favourite, and has given much good counsel to the King in matters concerning which the Queen is incapable," said James calmly, "specially, that is, as to fighting the English, and expelling them from the country. Have you not heard what she said to the King when it was foretold by his own soothsayer that she should live to do service to a great and victorious sovereign. 'Then let me go to the court of the King of England,' said she, rising to take her leave, 'that I may serve him! For as for His Majesty of France, he cares for naught save hunting and pleasure. I but lose my time and hinder the fulfilling of my destiny by remaining longer here!' Which when the King heard that, he was stung to the heart, and forthwith girded on his armour and did valiantly in many battles. Then Agnes Sorel retired for five years to her country seat, where she had been brought up as a young girl. But of late the Queen, seeing that the King again drew slack to oppose the English, went in person to fetch her back to the court, which many thought she was foolish for doing. But here comes Her Majesty the Queen in person."

And across the green alleys, as it were from the side curtains of the garden, about which cropped hedges of yew were drawn in a sort of narrow labyrinth, there came a gracious lady, sedate and grave of aspect, yet without obvious melancholy.

Marie of Anjou, Queen of France, was still in the flower of her age, well able to attend to the affairs domestic of a court which had no fixed seat. But, for the rest,

she had no influence with the King, who, when she reproached him that the English were not expelled from Guyenne, replied that he knew very well that she only wanted to get the fish for Fridays better and cheaper from Bordeaux! So after one or two attempts she left the whole governance of the King, in such matters, to her young ward, the lady Agnes, whose title of Dame de Beauté constitutes by no means the greatest of her claims to be remembered.

James Douglas bent the knee to the Queen of France, but, as I judged, with something less of fervour than he had showed when he kissed the hand of Mistress Sorel.

"And who may this be?" she said with her motherly serenity, looking long at me, and then turning to Mademoiselle Sorel for information.

The Dame de Beauté lowered her eyes and smiled, but, for reasons which I appreciate better now than then, she left James to make the introduction.

"A princess in your own right, my dear?" said the queen, "and to marry your cousin by the special permission of His Holiness the Pope—you are a happy woman, or ought to be. Indeed, if this be the cousin—(she turned towards the Lord James as he spoke, but Agnes Sorel quickly interrupted)—"Permit me to set Your Majesty right," she murmured; "that tall, dark man over there is the Earl of Douglas; he who talks to the King and the Dauphin concerning state affairs in the alcove yonder."

The Queen looked at the three men, of whom one was her husband and the other her son. These two were bending towards William Douglas and listening eagerly, as Will, with his usual self-absorption, laid down the law on some subject of importance to himself.

"Ah," she said, "I would it had not been so—for your sake, that is, my little lady. No woman can halter these men of many and great ideas. When you wed, my princess, see that you keep the smile ready on your lips even when the tears lag not far behind. Lock the sadness up, but let the hearth-fire be lit, and (if God be good to you) the children playing about the door when

your husband rides back through the outer gate. For the ideas of such a man drive him fast and far—yea, against his will. His very greatness compels him to go on and yet on. Stop he cannot. His task will never be done. Kingdoms unknown, foes unproved, there are to conquer. New horizons open continually before him, and—I discern clearly the gloom of fate unfulfilled on his face! If he die in his bed, this husband whom you have chosen, I am cheated of my foresight—I, a woman who have suffered much, tell you so! A gloomy prophecy—yet it is better that the heart should be forewarned."

Then she turned to James, who had been listening with an amazed expression to the Queen's words, for indeed he loved not sad talk at any time. "And the great blonde cousin here," she added, "is he yet wedded?"

James laughed softly and a little scornfully.

"Nay," he said; "those I would have will none of me. And as for the others——"

At this point, even as he shrugged his shoulders, Mademoiselle Sorel turned her eyes upon him. There was a smile in them—a smile which, for some reason, discomfited our good James no little.

"May I walk with you, little one?" she said, gently touching me on the shoulder with her hand. "I think the Queen has something to say to my Lord James of Douglas!"

They walked away together, while we followed them, silent till we had entered upon the alleys of green shade, in which the Queen's head-dress (of the fashion of twenty years ago, winged above like a sea swallow and with a falling frill of white muslin to cover the neck below) reminded me of my mother in the old days at Thrieve—as she was wont to stand in the embrasure of the tower, looking eastward for the home-coming of the "boys," who would never grow to be men.

The Queen and James soon passed out of sight. I was left alone with Agnes Sorel. For a time she did not speak, pacing gently along with her eyes abased upon the tall Easter lilies, which, in the light wind, swayed like her own slender body.

"Little maid," she said, "I am well-nigh twice as old as you—and no longer a girl. I have seen much, and, they say, have profited thereby. They call me still 'La Belle des Belles!' These nicknames stick long. They ought rather to call me the wisest of those who once were fair. The profit may have been great, but it has also been bitter. Bear with me!"

"You are the most beautiful woman I have ever seen!" The words came from me I hardly know how. But I meant them—yes, as if I, too, had been her lover.

She sighed, and looked about her a little wistfully.

"I have never thought much of that," she said gently.

"Nay," I answered, feeling somehow more at ease with her, "others were, I doubt not, ready enough to do that for you!"

She poised a finger at me with an expression half arch, half melancholy.

"Little flatterer," she said, "do they teach even the maids to utter love glosings in their cradles in Scotland? Or have the Sisters taught you the trick at St. Brigida's along with the abacus and broidering frame?"

"Neither," I said. "I speak the truth as I think it!"

"Ah, wait, little lady," she said. "In two years you will be as a bird-of-paradise to my barn-door fowl. You gain every day in beauty. Wit you have already, as is abundantly manifest. What you want is wisdom. That is all I now possess. In everything else I am far upon the return!"

"Not so, my Lady of Beauty," I answered her. "You will never cease to be as young and beautiful as I see you now!"

(And when I spoke I knew not how true the words were to prove.)

But she only smiled sadly and answered me in a proverb of her country, as, indeed, she had a habit of doing.

"*Adieu, baskets,*" she said, "*vintage is done!*"

Then gently and sweetly, as she did everything, she looked at me.

"But, my dear," she continued, "it is not so with you. Your baskets are of the finest silver and they are worthy

to be filled with apples of gold. But will they be? Ah" (here she sighed), "it is not good for a woman to be too beautiful—or what is the same thing, to have the name for it."

"But I am not," I said, awkwardly enough—blushing too, I doubt. For had not James told me that very thing two hours agone as we rode to Amboise? Not that I heeded James much, for he was always cataloguing my charms like a bill of accompt! But Larry—well, Larry spoke the truth even when it hurt. Only Will, my cousin, cared nothing for the matter one way or other. Indeed, I doubt if ever he remarked my face more than the spangles on the wings of the summer butterflies that fluttered by, balancing themselves like thistledown in the light wind. So it is small wonder that I blushed because La Belle des Belles said this thing.

Whereupon immediately she took my arm and bent over me, most loverlike.

"Princess," she said, "there is a proverb—'Buy peace and a house ready built!' That is my advice. Love your husband and none other man. He is, they say, both a good man and a wise—a little hard, maybe, but yet to the wife who keeps the home-fires bright, a husband has a nose of wax. Nine times out of ten, she can make of him what she will. So at least we say in Touraine, and I judge it is a true word. There is, of course, the tenth!"

"But I can never love my cousin Will," I cried, "no, not if he were to be twenty years my husband!"

Agnes Sorel rested her hand a little more heavily on my shoulder as she replied, "Yes, you will love him—only pray God it may not be too late!"

I looked about me. Will was, as I expected, deep in talk with the King, and the Dauphin was sitting by, watching them out of those twinkling pupils of his eyes, which closed and opened again ever so little, like a cat's in the sun.

But James, walking with the Queen, was at the moment looking over his shoulder at me, and actually had the audacity to make that pouting movement of the lips which

the French call *petite moue.* He would rather have been with us, he meant to say; and he did it so openly that I was frightened lest the King or other might see him.

"The Lord James is your husband's brother?" said Agnes Sorel, with (I thought) more of meaning in her tone than was necessary.

"One of five!" I answered; "the eldest after the Earl!"

"He follows you?" she continued, as if it were a matter of public knowledge.

"Nay," answered I, with some little heat, "he saved me from the dungeons of the Maréchal de Retz at Machecoul, and on that account I have seen more of him than of my other cousins, who besides are much younger. Will, whom for the sake of the House I must marry, I have scarce seen at all."

"Ah," she said, after a pause, "then you love this James. I am sorry. Such round-the-corner affection as this is poor capital to begin house-keeping on!"

"Indeed, I love him not—no, nor any man in the world," I cried with much hotness of speech. "I would give all I possess to rid me of the whole wearyful teasing crew. And of all things that tease, my cousins are the worst—excepting Will, that is, who takes no notice of anything."

"And that," here the Dame de Beauté smiled, "you being a woman, like worst of all!"

"Nay," said I, returning to the main question, "you do James a great wrong. He loves me, indeed, but he would as lief say so before his brother as to myself, and as for William—if he did, why he would only continue to expound Rights Royal and Rights Seigneurial, Privilege and Prerogative, Domaines and Feodalities, while James made verses upon my eyelashes or told over for the fiftieth time the rings upon my fingers!"

The brows of the Dame de Beauté were drawn into a frown. The line of firmness showed plain between them.

"I must speak with William, Earl of Douglas," she murmured; "this marches worse than I thought."

"You shall not," I cried, snatching away from her.

"What right have you to take so much upon you? What am I to you—aye, or what is William Douglas either? Pray grind your own corn with the water out of your own mill-dam, Mistress Agnes Sorel!"

The Dame de Beauté was no ways put down by my rudeness; indeed, since I had spoken as a baby, she treated me as one.

"To-day explains Yesterday, and To-morrow the Day After," she said; "but we must wait the Last Day of All to know everything! Then you also will know that I was right. Though now my words anger you, and are out of tune to your ear, believe that I know that which is best for you. Have I not bought that knowledge with a great price? Let your heart follow your hand, and, as you love God, draw yourself apart from the Lord James, your cousin! He is a light man. He hath the wandering eye. He will make no woman happy!"

"You shall not speak against James," I cried, yet more angrily than before. "I have known him from a child. He saved me from death—aye, worse, from the Altar of Evil itself at Machecoul. He can drive a lance with any man in France. It is not given you to say to a woman's heart, 'Stay here, or go there.' *When you were young as I, could you do as much with your own?*"

The Dame de Beauté bowed her head, and I think a tear fell upon her hand.

"God help me, that could I not!" she murmured; "but my failure only makes me the wiser physician for others. May the Mother Mary, in her mercy, keep your feet from the way mine have walked in!"

I took her hand, and would have answered more gently, for there were tears also in my eyes. But at that moment William, my cousin, came up, and, putting his hand on my arm, almost dragged me away, making no apology, saying neither *By-y'r-leave* nor yet Fare-ye-well!"

"The King desires to see you!" He said the words roughly. "Come!"

Then, as was natural, I flew into a yet greater anger, and said to him, "Do you think, sirrah, that this is the way to make a young maid love you?"

"I did not ask you to love me," he retorted upon me; "only to obey me!"

"Do as he bids; he is right!" murmured Agnes Sorel softly, as she turned away, her eyes upon the green untrodden grass and the nodding lilies of Our Lady.

CHAPTER XI

THE MISTS OF DEE

I CONFESS it was with a marvellous gladness that I saw our ancient castle of Thrieve stand up out of the morning mists, as we rode up Deeside from the little port of Kirkcudbright, where we had landed. I was once more in the land and among the people who were mine own. I could scarce repress my joy. When I leaped on the quay, I declare I could have kissed the many decent town's folk, who, with sundry of the neighbouring gentrice, had come down to welcome me. It was sweet to hear their honest Scots tongue again, though oftentimes I could hardly keep from answering back in French.

But Thrieve! To see it once more and know it mine—yes, *mine,* even though I must fulfil my word and give it (with myself) to another, and he a man whom I could not love.

But I did not think of that then—Thrieve and Maud Lindsay and Sholto! These were before me, and my heart beat fast to see the valley opening out, and the white haze lifting from the water-meadows. For though we had left it full summer in Touraine, we came to Galloway to find it little more than the breaking out of the spring-time on the white-thorns on the braes.

And (so I kept saying to myself) Maud could tell me what I must do—Maud would understand all. She would not preach like the others. She would know that the best way to make a young maid think of any man is constantly to abuse him to her behind his back. So they had done with James Douglas—all but William, that is—who, I believe, had as much idea of being jealous of his stable-knave.

But there was Laurence—whose angers, however, because of what I believe was in his heart towards me,

I could understand and forgive. But every day there was this one and that—each with a tale to bear of my Lord James and his wild doings—concerning maids of honour and such like. Last of all, and worst of all, there was Agnes Sorel, who had had so many bitter things to say of one concerning whom she knew nothing. Even the Sieur Paul (no white angel himself) could not let the poor lad go from Cour Cheverney without a blow in the by-going, perhaps thinking to curry favour with me.

"You are marrying the right brother," he said; "you will sleep the easier for it! My Lord Quicksilver here would be always out at the hay-making!"

But I answered him back that it was all upon the turn of a coin which of my cousins I wedded—that they were all five of them brave men, right Douglases, and true Scots. The which words, being sorry for afterwards, caused me upon taking of my leave, to hold up my cheek for the Sieur Paul to kiss—saying that it was an ancient Scots custom, the first time that one had tasted of a good man's hospitality. And Messire Paul had the grace to reply, "I thank you, my lady Princess, for your great condescendence. By St. Denis, if I had been a younger man, and somewhat slimmer of my body, I should have broken a lance with these lads myself for the honour of your hand—though, indeed, as to the matter of your vow I am no Scot, but only a true Douglas in name and in heart!"

"Well," I said, "for that good and brave saying I will give you back your kiss—which is more than I have ever given to any of these very poor young men, riding upon horses!"

For I knew how envious James was for the like, and of course it pleased me to think that he would hear and see. Which, indeed, he did, and grilled within him—not speaking a word for the better part of a day, as we took our way down the water-side towards the port of Nantes, where we were to embark in the little ship which was to bring us safe to Scotland.

. . . . . .

But it is of Thrieve and my home-coming that I have to

"I SAW OUR ANCIENT CASTLE OF THRIEVE STAND UP OUT OF THE MORNING MISTS"

speak. One thing there was which appeared strange to me. Already William had taken all under his care. It was "my castle," "my men," "my lands," "my fiefs"—till I was moved to say, "Not so fast, my dear Lord of Douglas and Avondale—here you are only my cousin Will, come on a visit to MY castle. Do not, in the press of your plans, forget that poor little Margaret is still the châtelaine of Thrieve!"

Never did you see a man more taken aback.

"Betrothed or married—it is the same thing," he said. "Besides, have I not faithfully administered your estates for you all the time you have spent in France?"

"Yes, surely, Will," said I, in the tone that never failed to make him nettled, "it is of that I would speak. You were doubtless a good 'doer,' an excellent steward. But now that I am once more in my province and principality—why, I am proud to be able to entertain my Lord of Avondale, his brother, the Lord James, and the Abbot of Dulce Cor for as long as they will deign to remain with me."

But in spite of myself, I could not keep my gravity at the dismay on his face, and I had perforce to laugh, which spoilt all.

"Margaret," he said, "there is much to do—little time to do it in. Let us make all secure. Before we enter Thrieve, I would have you appoint a day for our wedding and forewarn a priest——"

"Not Larry, then," I cried. "He will never tie you firmly enough to the estates you wish so much to marry. Galloway itself might slip off the thread, with only such an apprentice at the parson work as Laurence McKim to tie the knot. And that, you know, would break your heart, William."

At which James laughed, till he chanced to observe the expression in his brother's eyes. But for that I cared nothing. Will might be as angrisome as a wullcat of the Forest of Buchan—he would not fright me.

"Listen, Cousin Will," I said. "There has come to me in the night a proposal which, if you accept, will end all your anxieties. Here it is. Take Galloway, take the

North, take the Forest, take all that is mine on the Borderside! Leave me only the little Isle of Thrieve, with Maud Lindsay and her husband Sholto to look after me—enough meal in the meal-ark to make our porridge, a little beef in the larder for the house-carles, as many chickens as I can breed and feed—and as for me I promise never to meddle with you or with your plottings any more! What say you to that?"

Then for a moment William Douglas said nothing. He still said nothing when James cried out, "Bravely said, cousin mine!—I for one will stay and help you feed the chickens—let them go follow glory who love glory. She is but any old unwashed dishclout, an unstable wench that gives a man more cuffs than cossetings."

Then for one wild moment there came a hope in my heart that Will would take me at my word. But his silence was only his accustomed way of examining everything seriously, and of giving a fair and equal consideration to each proposition that was placed before him. This it was which made it so easy for me to tease him, and also so impossible for him to reply. For, long before he had time to prepare his phrase, I was, so to say, "out of the window with the swallows."

"Margaret," he said, quite simply for so great a man, "I do not use ink-horn terms. But I tell you this—if you speak in earnest, you know not what you say. And if not—then *I* know not what you mean!"

So after this I said no word more, nor yet did James. For there is nothing so disconcerting to those who count themselves clever with the tongue (which both James and I did) than to be put down by the simplicity of one whom they know greater than they.

But there at the last was the boat waiting to ferry us across the river. (For be it not forgotten that the Castle of Thrieve lies upon an island of twenty acres or thereby, with the river Dee running deep about it on every side—save at a place on the east where, as I remember, it was mostly possible to cross on stepping-stones in the long droughts of summer.) And in the boat, to my eye more beautiful than La Dame de Beauté herself, there sat—

could it be? Yes—my old companion and only friend—sweetest Maud Lindsay, she who had married Sholto McKim, now the governor of Thrieve and war-captain of all the levies of my Lord the Earl of Douglas—most dear and notable, both of them.

"Maud!" I cried, slipping from my pony and running to the margent to meet her. I was about to clasp her in my arms as I used to do—as vividly and rapturously as if we had been lovers of only a handful of days. But, gazing at me, she seemed to be amazed somehow—I cannot tell why—perhaps because I was so grown and tall—having gowns of silk to my feet, that I too paused.

And then to my utter astonishment, she suddenly bent down upon her knee and seizing my hand, she kissed it, weeping and murmuring words like these: "Oh, my gracious lady, you have grown so beautiful! But I knew it! I knew it would fall out so!"

Upon which I lifted her up and gave her a sound shake of anger. For I have a quick temper, and when people do not do just *what* I want *when* I want it—well, *I shake them!*

So I shook Maud.

"You doting silly little fool," I cried, "do you not know that you are Maud—my Maud, whom I love more than a world of men? Why, it is for you I am come home, do you hear? I will be a goose-girl to you, if you will but let me stay, and love me as of old. I will nurse the last baby—though, indeed, really I love them not greatly till they can run and speak (being like a man in that)! I will play with them on the downs by the Three Thorns and listen to the clank of the armourer's hammer if Malise is still at his anvil. But I will not—I swear it—be a Princess and a great lady to you!"

And I fairly sprang upon her neck, putting my arms about and about—yes, and kissing her over and over till she was sobbing blindly in my arms without let or stint, truce or limit, happily weeping—which indeed is one of woman's greatest luxuries, till at last she becomes old and awaits the end. Then (hard that it should be so) the fount of her tears is dried up, and she sorrows like a

man, rendingly, and without pleasure. I that write these things know.

However, there, on the bank of Dee Water, I let Maud weep. And it did her good. For she was young and fair, and there were many there to see. I think Sholto had been wont to stop her, thinking (being a man, and, therefore, in these matters a fool!) that a woman's tears signified unhappiness. But I knew my Maud better. And so, in time we made a good end, with Laurence waiting behind with a solemn countenance, Will cutting impatiently at his boot with his riding switch, and James all upon the broad grin. (He thought he understood these things, women, and so forth—God help him! He who thinks that is the greatest fool of all.) And lo! looking up, there, on the opposite bank, was Sholto, looking like a prince, all in black armour, with the warden's red favour on his helmet. He had his visor down, and at the head of his gentlemen, with his plume sweeping his shoulders, he appeared, as I say, like a very god. And Maud, wiping her tears, whispered, "Yes, I dressed him," in answer to my words in her ear.

We went across, just cousin Will and I, with Maud (whom I would not for anything leave behind) holding my hand all the time as if I might yet escape her. And when we were at the most half way across—lo, she smiled with eyes still wet, and it was like the sun of August shining through clouds on the dripping corn stooks.

"Oh, I am so glad to have you again, my own little Maid!" she said, and kissed me.

"Ah," I cried triumphantly, "that is better! You are my Maud, after all—my Maud—my Maud!"

As for cousin Will, he said nothing, only with his eye ran over the accountrements of the knights of the escort and the soldiers of the guard, to see if he could pick a fault.

But he had Sholto McKim to deal with, and his lieutenant, Andro the Penman. So all was as in such a case it could not help being. And then as the boat came gently to the little landing-place, which was built with pier and break-water, all complete, like a tiny harbour—my dear

brother David had taken a pride in it—I sprang directly upon my own Isle of Thrieve.

At the same moment Sholto leaped from his horse. Andro the Penman unlaced his helm, and the Captain of the Douglas Guard, bare-headed, kneeling on the soft grass of the river brink, presented to me the keys of the castle upon a golden paten.

But because all my life I loved not ceremony, I only clapped him on his head—which was covered all over with crisp curls, cut short so that his head would not be too hot within the leather-lined shell of steel they call a helmet, and bade him give the keys to William. Which when he had done, he kissed my hand and I asked him if his father ever beat him with his buckled waist-strap nowadays?

This I did to make him laugh. For ceremonies, especially when only one person is ceremonious, are awkward things, and it needs tact to get quit of them without the hurting of feelings. But then—well, you learn how to manage such things in France. A convent is good for so much at any rate.

So in a few moments we were all talking quickly together, while the boat went back to bring over James together with Laurence and his people. My cousin Will did not say much, but then no one expected it of him. When he had shaken hands with Sholto, kissed Maud Lindsay's hand, nodded to Andro the Penman and his brother, forthwith he devoted himself to the examination of every part of the architecture of the castle as if he had never seen it before—the outer works, the moat, the great drawbridge, the flanking towers, the wall of enceinture, and the keep with its high gallery of wood, set on wooden beams.

I could see him shake his wise head. There was in the matter of shaking no one like Will. You could always tell when he had an idea. He shook it as a terrier shakes a rat, as the mill-hopper doth the corn.

"That will never do—never," I heard him mutter, "we must have them of stone—as at Amboise. At the first red-hot ball from a mortar they would be in a blaze!"

From that I could discern very clearly the direction of his thoughts.

So Maud and I were left alone, Sholto directing his gentlemen of the Douglas Guard to ride on either side as an escort. It was good to see him mount his horse as easily as of yore, even though in full armour, which showed me that, though the father of a family, he had lost none of his old active ways. And indeed, as the future proved, Sholto had only grown stronger and firmer in his seat, so that even James was no longer a match for him at the spear-driving when they tried it in the lists of Thrieve Isle.

Then Maud went on to tell me how each of her babes was more wonderful than the others. She spoke of Marcelle, the eldest, who was learned in broidery work and could read like clerk Laurence himself; of Cuthbert and Bride, the twins, who for ever fought and harcelled each other, even as their father and uncle had done about the old forge on the bank of Carlinwark. Then there was Ulric and little David, the one falling over the twitch-grass of the meadow-land and digging at the sandy rabbit holes like a scent dog, while as yet, David, being the youngest, was content to sit on the lap of his mother solemnly contemplating the grey walls of Archibald the Grim, where so many generations of McKims had done their service to as many generations of Douglases.

At last, at last—there was the drawbridge coming down! But another porter louted low where surly old A'Cormack had so long turned his great creaking wheel. The willows along the waterside, the garden inside with its homely flowers, and without, that with the homelier plants for the pot! Thrieve! Thrieve! Could ever any place be so dear? It was good to see even the well in the courtyard, with the great beech twisting about it, and then, running to the edge, to mark, as of yore, the dripping leathern plants—hartstongues they call them. They were the same, only a little longer, a little more leathery, and a little more drippy than I had imagined when I thought of them in the convent, which I did often in chapel on hot afternoons.

Meanwhile, Will had gone about the house and about it, had examined the defences in detail, with an eye fresh from Loches and Amboise, picking out weak points, noting what must be altered, what must be done away with, what had grown antiquated, and, generally, how the naturally strong position of the castle could best be strengthened.

After a while he strode into the courtyard with the scowling brow which with him only betokened deep thought. I was holding up Ulric, that sturdy scion of the family of the McKims, a lusty tribe enough; but, i'faith, at the sight of Will's dark face he dropped his head on my neck and howled most unvalorously. Maud laughed a little at some inarticulate words which came from his baby lips.

"What does he say?" I asked, smiling.

"He says," murmured Maud, "that he will tell his father of the naughty black man who wants to carry Ulric away!"

I sighed.

"I wish it were only Ulric that Cousin William has it in his head to take away!" I cried.

At that moment came Will up, stalking over the flagged pavement, solemn as a stork in armour.

"Margaret," he said, as if he asked, "What's o'clock?"

"I forgot. You have not yet named a day for our marriage."

"Why," said I, "how am I to dare? I might cross your wondrous devices. Let Your Highness choose your own time! Say, shall it be some morning a few years hence, when you have no plans to make, no rent-rolls to revise, no troops of horse to pass in review, when all your architects and builders have ceased from troubling, and there is not even an arrow-shooting or a wapenshaw in all the Douglas country from south to north, when all the thieves are hanged out of Annandale, and there is not a cow in her wrong byre from Edenmouth to Berwick bound, when you are the King of the King of Scots, and Lord of the Lords of the north—then, unless you have an unproven hawk to fly at a heron or a main of lusty cocks

to fight, or a leash of dogs to take out for the coursing—why, good sir, of your pleasure, will you please to marry me?"

But Will took it all quite solemnly, or at least appeared to do so.

"Thank you," he said, "this is Wednesday—shall we say Saturday? There is nothing to take me away from Thrieve before that."

I let the boy drop on the grass in my horror. His mother ran to rescue him, but Master Ulric was noways alarmed. He only rolled over, and putting his great toe in his mouth, lay regarding the sky.

"No, Will," I said, "be good enough to remember that I am not a parcel of goods to be handed over the counter, nor yet a bullock to be delivered three days after sale, sound in wind and limb. Give me a month, if it were only, like the daughter of Jephthah, to bewail my——"

But I did not get time to finish my quotation.

"Child," he cried, for the first time visibly angered, "you do not know what you say! This thing is the will of God."

"It is the will of William, Earl of Douglas, which is considerably more to the point," I retorted mockingly. But he did not heed. It took more than the flout of a girl to move Will of Douglas and Avondale from his purpose.

"Then, I take it," he repeated, as it were extracting the kernel of meaning and leaving the husk of words as of no value, "you are willing that we should be married in a month!"

"If it is His Majesty's good and gracious pleasure," I said, "and he happens to have nothing better to do!"

And I made him a low reverence with the most provoking mock humility.

But I might as well have tried my agaceries on the blue ridge of Ben Gairn, steady on the horizon of the south.

"So be it!" he said, and turning sharp on his heel he went out.

"I declare," cried Maud, "your bridegroom has gone to

examine the state of the water-defences at the southern end of the Isle!"

"I do not wonder," I retorted; "he had them on his mind all the time."

"Margaret!" she cried, pained at my manner of speech of William Douglas.

"Yes, Maud!" I answered in the same tone, nodding as one would say, "there it is! Make what you like of it!"

CHAPTER XII

WHAT MAUD LINDSAY TAUGHT ME

It was not long before I had made my case plain to Maud Lindsay. All my infancy and childhood she had been my companion. In the time of De Retz, she and I had been shut up in the White Tower together, and at the last had paced hand in hand the dread approaches to the Iron Altar—as has already been told in certain chronicles entitled "The Black Douglas."

So to me Maud was no new friend—no confidante of a day.

Thrieve itself had grown a new place—what with the merry chink of children's voices coming up from the green, and the rotund twins trying on pieces of armour in the great hall of the guard amid the riotous laughters of the men-at-arms.

More than once Sholto had declared that this Thrieve was no proper nursery for women and babes. He had even desired during the presence of the Avondale Douglases and myself at the Castle to take Maud away to the Three Thorns, where my cousin Earl William had caused them to repair the old cottage for his father, Malise McKim, loving the situation better than the forty-shilling lands of Mollance with the grand new house thereon, which had been forced upon the armourer for his great and notable services to the family of Douglas.

So we two, just Maud and I, went out on the balcony of wood which opens upon the castle wall near the top, and makes a promenade about all four sides. But that was our favourite gossiping place which looked towards the south. William was, indeed, determined to new-make the higher battlements in stone, as well as the wooden galleries. But in the meantime we loved the old brown logs, rough-hewn and weather-stained, with the marks of the knives of three or four generations of Douglases,

making transfixed hearts therein, together with the initials of their sweethearts—the which, indeed, with the flourishing of their own signature, was mostly all the learning they ever had. For, though we have had both abbots and bishops to our name, the Douglases of the Black could not be called a book-learned race.

As we sat, Maud worked busily turning her head from side to side like a painter in a church, to observe the effect of her dainty confectionery of lace and fine linen. As for me I looked over the river to the green Kelton fields and the swelling ridges of Arieland. All was sweet and covered with a great peace: or so at least it seemed to me at that time.

Who could have supposed that the slender figure yonder, clad in black, taking quick alert strides, with Sholto and Murdoch the master-builder a little behind—now down by the great moat, pointing with ready index-finger wherever masonry was to be strengthened or water deepened—now erect as a spear against the sky-line of the topmost tower—everywhere planning, deciding, registering, commanding,—was to bring the Douglas line to its highest glory, and by his death to sink it into utter extinction.

It was long before either Maud or I spoke. I think both of us were somewhat unwilling to begin. I had left her a girl, she was now a matron. She had last seen me a child. Now below us, there was my husband of a month hence, walking about—and—never giving me so much as a thought or a glance.

It was Maud who spoke first.

"Tell me," she said softly, "are you happy?"

I think that I laughed. But somehow it was not a laugh that sounded as it ought.

"Happy?" I cried. "That is a strange word, Maud Lindsay, to be speaking to me! Should not the bride of Will of Avondale and Douglas be happy? Have I not looked forward to this ever since I could remember?"

Maud shook her head, very slowly and soberly.

"I wish I could be sure, little Maid," she said—it was her old pet name for me. "I am not fond of these agree-

ments between high contracting parties. They are likely to leave love out of account."

"But you knew your Sholto a long time?" I said sharply.

Maud laughed a laugh—a laugh—oh, quite different from mine. Even I could hear that.

"Ah, but," she said, "that was because I never really made up my mind to marry Sholto till—till—well, I stood with him before the priest."

"Fykes and fiddlesticks!" I cried, "how dare you tell me lies, Maud. I was, indeed, a child at the time—but I have a memory! So have a care! I know that you had your mind made up long before. Do you remember that night?"

She put her hand over my mouth and looked over her shoulder smiling.

"Hush!" she said, "I give in; but, all the same, the thing is true enough. What I *had* made up my mind about was only that Sholto should not marry anyone but me!"

And as she said this she laughed again, a mellow retrospective laugh, which somehow thrilled me between the heart and the throat, and then presently left me saddened with the sense of lacking I knew not what.

Why should this woman, the wife of a blacksmith's son, be so much happier than I could ever be? It came nigh to making me desperate.

It was not Sholto I wanted—of course not. It was not Laurence. It was not even James Douglas. It was no man in particular. God knows—*none*. It was only the need to be loved, as women are loved, for whom there is but one man in the world.

I wept quietly. Maud let me alone. She was a wise woman. She let me alone to ease myself with tears—many tears.

"Why is it," I wailed, unable long to keep silence, "why do others have so much without knowing or caring, while I so little—worse than nothing, indeed?"

Then all at once Maud let the rich frillings and dentellations she had been putting together, fall to the ground.

She slipped them off her knee as if they had been horse-cloths, and came directly and kneeled down beside me, with her arms close held about me.

At first I pushed her away. I could be a pig when I chose—but not for long.

"You are like the rest," I said; "you come to tell me how noble a man—how worthy, how truly like Solomon, King of the Jews, arrayed in all his glory is my Lord William of Douglas!"

It was pettish, I know—like a child—like me. But Maud never so much as moved her finger.

"Little one," she said gently, "when you were used to quarrel with your puppet, did I pick it up after you had thrown it on the ground and set about trying to convince you that there was never such a beautiful puppet in the world, so delightful a plaything? No, I knew better. I put it away till you yourself asked for it!"

Somehow the idea made me laugh.

"Oh, our Will a plaything! Look at him, Maud! I pray you look at him!"

And still laughing, I leaned over the wooden balcony. There he was—his head a-poke before him—eager as a sleuth-hound on the scent—the master-builder following meekly after with Sholto, the last not too much engaged to wave his hand to us, and, seeing Maud's face, to throw us a kiss also balconywards over his shoulder.

"Look at my plaything," I laughed, "my plaything that I have thrown down—only that I have never taken it up! Ask for it, indeed! Not if you locked it away for a thousand years! There he is—my father-confessor in armour—my black crow in nestingtime—see him gathering the sticks—see—see!"

And, indeed, at that moment William Douglas did stop and pick a piece of stick which a careless carpenter had left behind. With great solemnity, all absent of mind as if he had been thinking of something else, he went to the woodpile and dropped it upon a heap of kindling chips.

"Ho, by St. Bride, saved!" I cried, "now he will sleep sound. There is the thousandth part of a farthing saved!

Ah, good crow—valiant crow—crow of parts! Who would not wed a crow like that? Ah, ah!"

And I laughed till I sobbed, and then sobbed till I laughed, stretching ever further over the balcony to see what he would do next, and pointing at him through my streaming tears, as I cried helplessly, "Oh, stop me, stop me, stop me, Maud! Why don't you stop me? I shall die! He is so like a—no, I will not say it. Yes, I will stop. Do not be angry with me, Maud. I think I am not myself—overwrought! But, oh——"

And then I went back again into the same helpless laughter.

Then Maud, taking upon her the old authority, which when a child I had never thought of disputing, lifted me in her strong, soft, motherly arms and compelled me to lie down in her chamber. It was nearer than my own, though smaller. The window looked to the north, and from it you could see the green double bosoms of Cairnsmore and Carsphairn.

Here she put me to bed like an infant, locking the door inside against intrusion, bathing my forehead, pressing her cheek against mine and murmuring tenderly, just as she used to do in the White Tower of Machecoul when the nights were hot and the Terror near at hand.

And, being quite tired out, I lay still, with Maud Lindsay's arm about my neck, and her fingers gently moving among my hair, till with a sense of utter lassitude and a certain slow-coming peace of well-being, I fell on sleep, long and dulcet. It was good somehow, for anyone to be with Maud. That was all. No wonder her babes adored her. At that moment I felt like one of her children myself, though by the calendar she was not more than ten years older than I.

I awoke. The world slowly re-formed itself, emerging hazily, not all at once—rather a bit here and a bit there. I noted, as in a dream, the oak of a child's crib, like that in which I had slept long ago when my brothers were alive and my mother gave me up to Maud Lindsay to take care of—pretty Maud from the North, that flouted all the men near and far who came a-wooing her.

Then my eye fell upon a wreath of withered flowers, then came the keen blue edge of a sword, the crossbars of a helmet, and, strange to be seen, thrown over it, some of that dainty dentelling of white, fine as mist, which Maud had been making. There was also the scent of a woman's chamber—not the cell of a *pensionnaire* at a convent, not even the great bald spaces of the guest-chambers of Cour Cheverney, with the red creepers flowering about the windows and the Judas tree budding purple all along its branches in the court beneath.

It was different, somehow. All smelt of home, yet was not somehow. These things were Sholto's and Maud's—together. Together! Would it ever come that I would see William Douglas's helm and gloves thrown thus on a chair with *my* kirtlings of silk and lace *dentelles* over it? No—a thousand times no! He could never be to me—*this!* Anything else—a friend, a companion, a guide, and adviser—yes! But this—No!

I raised myself, affrighted like one who starts from an ill dream and desires to sleep no more lest it should return. The thing had never come to me thus clearly. But I saw now what I had never realised before—the terrifying Solitude, the appalling Nearness of Two—a man and a woman left alone for life—by the mumble of a priest, by the will of a dead man, or by the land-hunger, the power-thirst of one who cared for women only as so many steps on the ladder of his greatness.

"No—no—no!"

I called the words out, like one starting back from deadliest terror. And as I said the words I felt about me loving arms, drawing me, heard a voice sweet and soothing as the hum of bees in clover on June meadow-lands.

"Margaret, Margaret—do not fear! I am with you!" It was the voice of Maud Lindsay. "Be my own little lass, my treasure, my bairn as of old. It shall not come to you—that which fears you. The back is made for the burden; and, as I love you (yes—the first-born of my bairns no better!) you shall not marry a man whom you do not love."

"But I must—I must"—I again speaking (I mind it

well), in a panting whisper strange even to myself, as I sat up in bed—"it is fixed for a month hence. Did you ever know of William of Douglas and Avondale going back on his word? Besides, has he not sent Laurence for the Pope's permission—and blessing? Figure it to yourself, Maud—the Holy Father's *blessing!* He should have said his curse—the Greater Anathema the Bald Cat used to prate about at the Convent."

But still Maud kept her arm about me, sisterly and motherly at one and the same time.

"Listen," she said. "I am but poor Maud Lindsay, who married the man she loved, Sholto, the blacksmith's son of Thrieve: I, who might have married my cousin, Lord John, the Tiger Crawford, and, perhaps, healed a breach into which brave men have poured their blood. I married Sholto because I wished it so. Well, hear me out, I am not Will of Douglas and Avondale, but I have a will of my own. I have never wished greatly for anything in my life, never *prayed* for anything greatly (which is just the better way of wishing for it) without getting it at last. Perhaps not exactly as I figured it to myself, when I prayed and when I wished, but in a wiser and wholesomer way! Yes, always!"

I formed my lips to answer.

"Nay—hush—not yet. Do not speak. Let me say my say out! So, trust me when I say that happiness will come for you—or, at least, the happiness of making the man you love less sad. That is the pleasure most often granted to women in place of their own proper joy. Perhaps it will come to you thus. But that it will come, be sure—be very sure—I, Maud Lindsay tell you! Now, little one, have I said one word you thought I would say, given you any old-wife, good-my-gossip counsels, preached the orthodox submission of maids? 'Love will come'—they say 'come with the children'! Bah! I know different. Nothing tries the love of a woman for a man more than the re-repetition of the Eden curse; but where love is, to begin with—small as the mustard seed that grows into the greatest of all herbs, as Father Ignace preached about once on Pacque Sunday—all things are

possible. Bide, my bairn. I know William of Douglas far better than you. I know him. There is a shell over his heart, hard like the nether millstone; but the kernel within is true, and great—and unselfish!"

"Nay," I cried, grasping her by the wrist, "the other qualities perhaps, but not that—not unselfish!"

"*And* unselfish!" Maud repeated with emphasis, and, kissing me, left the room.

CHAPTER XIII

THE LAST GRAINS IN THE SAND-GLASS

THAT month fled all too fast away. Never had there been known a more perfect July. The scarlet poppies overleaped the corn already mellowing on the sandier knowes. Deep and lush grew the meadow-grass in which the Thrieve mowers, seeking far and near winter forage for the horses of Sholto's guard, found (sometimes to their cost) the wild bees' honey.

The hills in the mid-distance began to turn a ruddier purple, as the heather flushed for that more glorious harvest of the eye, which usually in Galloway comes rather with the oats than with meadow hay. And the days when I awaited the outcome of my talk with Maud Lindsay fled also too fast away, without, as it appeared to me, anything being accomplished.

Moreover, Laurence had forsaken me. Whether it was the near approach of my marriage day, or the need (which he asserted) for his presence upon his domain abbatical of Sweetheart, I cannot tell. But certain it is that he left Thrieve the emptier for the want of his boyish face and bright smile.

But James remained. And the fates of the life of woman—or some other organising power, at that time unseen by me—drew us more and more together. And, indeed, there is little to do for such a man as James Douglas about a castle, save to tilt at the ring and try his strength at the crossbars above the dungeon mouth. But since he could lift up two stalwart guardsmen by sheer muscle, the one clinging to the other's feet out of the deeps of the old cell built in the north-west corner of the guards' hall, there were few that cared to compete with him. All the same he would bring me down to see him do it.

On the other hand, Will coursed everywhere, like a questing hound—to Douglas Castle, to Annandale, across the West and Middle Marches, athwart the brown barren moors to visit his Earldom of Wigton—or, rather, that which would be his when he married me. The most feck of the days he would be up and away while the light was still pearly and pink in the East.

Often I would wake in the dawn to the clink of horses' hoofs far down in the court. I would hear the men of the escort standing to their arms ready to mount. A word of command—that of Sholto, who rode ever at the earl's right hand, and then, with a creak and a clang, down the drawbridge would go. To that succeeded a hollow rumble, which was the feet of the horses passing over, a neigh of some charger left lonesome in stall, and then for another day silence settled down upon all the precincts of the great old castle of Archibald the Grim.

I cannot think how it was that James and I gat into the habit of going to the little bushy "bouroch" (called the Lady's Bower) at the northerly end of the island. It came about first, I think, that he might show me the damage wrought by the great flood of a year agone, which happened when I was still in France. He pointed out, too, how, by embanking with solid stone and lime, like that which is to be seen in Holland, William had strengthened not only the island but all the defences on that side.

Now all the trees had been cut in the vicinity of the castle, for the sake of security in the case of siege. But at the northern end of the island there were many—though, alas! sadly thinned in the late troubles.

But there was our bower in the midst of them, where with the river blue and steady before us, wide almost as an arm of the sea, and scarce touched all that high summer time by a single purl of wind, we two would sit on a rough seat which James had knocked together with driftwood and chance roofing beams floated down for the new stabling.

Now Maud Lindsay was much with me in the afternoons, but in the mornings she had the housewifery of the castle to attend to—napery and suchlike—while in the

evening she used to sing her babies to sleep as her good way was. So it was chiefly in the forenoons and in the evenings that James and I strolled to the Lady's Bower.

Indeed, we had no great distance to traverse, for the whole island does not extend more than half a mile from stem to stern, being, as one might say, a long, narrow vessel anchored in the mid-stream of the Water of the Dee, the castle-keep set on the western bulwarks and somewhat towards the stern. So Thrieve was, and so, indeed, it is to this day.

Only James is no longer there. William devises no new defences, and the King's bullocks profane my Lady's Bower, which in the countryside clatter is now said to have been named after me. But it was not, taking its name from that Lady Sybilla who came from France and drew into her toils my brother William, as hath aforetime been told. But I have my own tale to tell, and it waits my pen.

Now it is always ill giving a reason why a woman loves this man and not that. For the most part, indeed, she would be hard pushed to tell herself. And so it was with my feeling for James Douglas. Sometimes I liked him, and again at others I could not abide that he should come near me.

But it was all the same to James whether I sulked or smiled. He had his answer ready, his excuse to his hand. He could be respectful and grave, quick-witted and carelessly gay, or simply companionable and full of gossip as an ale-wife, all in the space of an hour. He had the natural gift of taking a woman's humour and making it his. Will knew no humour but his own, and if it chanced you were not of it, then you passed out of the world so far as he was concerned.

Did James Douglas make love to me wittingly? Curious and still unanswered the query! Did Maud know or suspect? And in any case, what did she mean by encouraging me to hope for a love which the future would bring me? She herself had no great liking, even then, for James Douglas; yet at Castle Machecoul he had saved her, as he had saved me. But women's likings (I say it again) go not by these things.

Yes, I liked James—first of all, I think, because I knew that I ought not. Then he was a great, blond, towsy-haired giant, with the arm of Samson and the short thick beard of the statues on the King's new house at Striveling. When, for sport, one struck his breast, it was like beating a drum, and when he struck back, the stricken was carried out and had water poured over him.

Then, he was fair, like his father and most of the Avondales—I, black of the black, a right Galloway Douglas. But mostly these things go by contraries—the fair young Davids mating with the maids, dark but comely, out of the patched tents of Kedar and the tans of dusky Sepharvaim.

Yet I never felt that James Douglas really mastered me. Will could have done it, if he had chosen, mayhap. But James rather herded me with the silent discretion of a well-trained sheep-dog, which meets and holds but never chases or frightens a refractory charge.

Never absent, never late, with a smile on his lips, a twinkle in his blue eyes, and such a sunny helpfulness in his every action, small wonder that James Douglas had been fortunate all his life. He was a twin of the one birth with his brother Archibald, and only the favour of his mother and the indulgence of his father had given him, by solemn declarator, the position of elder brother and heir male to the title and estates.

Of his weaknesses and sins I need not speak here. They have entered into judgment with him while yet he breathes the upper air. But, nevertheless, there was much lovable, much gracious, much heartful and hope-inspiring about James Douglas, and though I have suffered many things, God be witness, I say no different even unto this day.

Above all men generous, ready to go out of his way to do a service to any, great or small, he yet loved the praise of men as a girl watches for admiration. So much I could see—and—I know not that I liked him the worse for it.

This James of ours would go into a tavern and ruffle it with the best—tossing tankards of ale with Hob and

Dob, the Selkirk "souters." He would drink down the Bordeaux and the vintages of parched champagne with kings and princes, giving them toast for toast, bumper for bumper. And if mid-way the first carouse, Hob of the Elsin chanced to grow ill-haired and cantankerous, who so ready as James of Douglas to take to quarterstaff and break a "souter's" head, or, in default of ready timber, with the sounder weapons of his clenched ten fingers.

Or, if, again, my Lord of Bracieux, or his Highness the Prince of Albany, came to words with him as to the colour of a maid's eyes, the degree of her beauty, or the immaculate perfection of her virtue, who so quick with sword and dagger to defend his opinion as James Douglas, or who, after all was done, more chivalrously willing to shake the hand of a fallen adversary, or assuage his wound with the ointment of marshmallows he kept in his spare helmet?

Besides which, there was something else about him which only a woman can feel, and even she cannot express. James Douglas was so made that no woman could be very angry with him, whatever he might do—that is, she could not keep up her anger for long.

So we walked together and talked, and it made me glad to know that the sword by his side had laid on the bent many an adversary, and that the strong arm which swung me so easily over the burns and hurled trunks of trees from near and far so that we could cross the ditches and stagnant hags of the morass, was ready to protect me as none other in all Scotland could.

At any rate (I deny it not) it grew perilously pleasant to hear the clink of the departing steeds which carried Will and Sholto to the four winds of heaven, and to know that we had, James and I, one other great high-arched day of summer all to ourselves, in which to wander at our wayward wills, to watch the moor-birds and the sea-fowl blown up from Solway, or late-nesting about the marshes of Carlinwark.

Then, too, James would take my hand—not freely and of one consent and accord like as Laurence was wont to do, but whether I would or no. Yet ever laughingly,

so that it would have seemed ill-tempered and dairy-maidish to make an objection about so light a thing.

"Cousins we are," he would say, "and brother and sister soon to be!"

Then he would sigh and look upon the ground for some while, as we went further and further from the castle barrier down through the green pleasances of the wood.

"I would that I had been the elder brother," he would bemoan himself; "'tis hard to love as I love, and yet——"

At the thought he grew more sober, and once for a moment I thought of a surety he was about to cry. So, because that seemed more terrible than all in a man, I took him hastily by the hand, saying, "you do not really love me, James! you know well you have loved a dozen before—aye, and more, if all tales be true."

"Lies! lies!" he would cry, "they are not true! I swear it by the bones of St. Bride. It is only a thing said by the common folk—the clash of the country! They fix on me—because Will is—as he is!"

"And how is he?" I asked, not too wisely, perhaps.

James laughed, yet not scornfully. For James Douglas was a gentleman, and true to his own. Not, however, a very great gentleman like my brother William, whom they slew at Edinburgh—or another whom I came to know later. So he did not mock his brother even when in act, perhaps without intent, to win away from him the love of his promised wife.

But at least he could not do that, for I had never given it to Will of Avondale. No, nor even counted him playmate and "little lover," as in the old childish days I had called Larry when Maud and Sholto strolled afield picking forget-me-nots or star-gazing at the constellations, as if the sky of one night were different from that of another.[1]

James Douglas laughed good-naturedly, carelessly, even affectionately, but at the same time like a man who

[1] I am told that it is indeed different, as seafaring men and such like know. Well, let them. For me, I neither know nor care. Venus is the sole star that ever I knew, and her I loved chiefly because she had an excellent habit of going early to bed.

feels himself armed cap-a-pie when there is talk of love-making.

"Ah, our Will," he murmured, "he will be a new William the Lion or Robert the Bruce, so be his head does not fall too soon under the axe. But he will never know what it is to live."

"And what," said I, drolling with him, "in your well-informed younger-brotherly wisdom may it be to live? To eat and drink, to ride and sleep, to marry or to give in marriage. That hath been the general opinion. Is Will shut off from these, Sir Wiseacre? I judge not the last —to my cost."

"The sap is in the trees, the honey in the flower, and the blood in men," James answered enigmatically. "Our good Will's veins are filled with the ink wherewithal to write state papers—a valuable fluid doubtless, but not one from which to distill either life for one's self or happiness for others!"

"And how would *you* proceed, most learned St. James of Avondale, high master of the mysteries?"

"Even thus," he said, slipping a hand about my waist, "if I had Will's chances I would not ride off every day at the crowing of the cock—to the north to see whether Douglas Castle sits still on its knowe, anon to the west to stir up the Agnew to hang a few more scores of Irelanders, then to the south to hector the Tutor of Bombie, and (last of all) to the west to see a new rigging put upon the pig-styes of Caerlaverock!"

I felt in my heart there was both meat and matter in what he said, and—I did not (to my shame) order him to take away his arm from about my waist. There was no barrier about the Lady's Bower to rest the back. His arm was strong and good to lean upon—just as Maud had said of Sholto's. I was curious to see if the thing were indeed true. And it was. It is useful to be told a thing, but after all that is the only hundreth part of knowledge.

"No," he went on, "I should be—where I am now. But with more right—not doing another man's work—tilling his ground that he may sow, planting that he may

reap. Bah! (here he broke off angrily), Will has manhood, but it is that of a mechanism of iron, that drives onward to its purpose. You and I, little Margaret, are but puppets in his game, quintains to be strewn hither and thither as he birses yont, so that the House of Douglas may put the Stewarts in the dust, or of all these castles, not one stone be left upon another!"

I had never seen him so moved.

"James," I said, gently enough, for there was that which tightened in my throat—I knew not why, "it is not for you of all men to speak thus—least of all to me, who in a handful of days am to be your brother's wife!"

"No," he said, more quietly, "you say truth, Margaret. But I have loved you—do not forget, ever since we played together on the Hill of Daisies up yonder where through a gap in the cloud-drift the corn-stooks wink yellow in the sun. I have gone further, taken greater risks, laid my life in pawn more often—yea, upon the turning of a hair for you—as did never Will! If I speak wrong—do wrong—lay these things in the other scale."

And suddenly turning he took me in his arms.

"After all you are mine," he cried fiercely. "I love you better than the other, if he is my brother! Do not forget it. I will wait for you—if it be a thousand years!"

CHAPTER XIV

AVE, AMOR—ATQUE VALE!

THE days went by all too quickly. The preparations for the wedding itself were begun. Pavilions with silken cords and rich broideries of cloth of gold, brought from France, were set up on the green. The old grey castle itself became gay and parti-coloured.

All too fast the end was coming, like the last grains making a dimpling whirlpool in the sand-glass.

Day and night James had pled with me to meet him once more—only to say farewell, but since my first weakness of the Lady's Bower, I was afraid. I would see him no more save in company of Maud or the children, for by this time we had made friends and they were climbing all about me. And at these hard words James moved about sad and disconsolate, his eyes on the ground and his fine curled locks, lint-white like a schoolboy's, all dishevelled and storm-tossed.

So after a time my heart had a little pity on him, and one day—it was the very afternoon before my marriage day (so little time was left me)—I set out without saying a word to any, going slowly through the meadows to the northward of the isle, plucking here a flower and there a broad leaf of bracken. I was assured that James would observe my way-going. I knew, too, that Maud would see James if he followed me. For it was the mid-afternoon when, according to her custom, she rested in her chamber, and the window looked towards the Lady's Bower.

At that time I had no clear knowledge what Maud's thoughts were with regard to me, save that she meant me well. And indeed, if all had turned out as Maud meant them to do, and the man had proved as worthy as

he seemed—well—who knows. At least I need not anticipate. I went my way. James followed, and there in the north-looking chamber above (as I knew but as James did not) was Maud Lindsay planning for my good.

Will, like the best and least exigent of bridegrooms, had gone a-hunting that there might be a sufficiency of game for his guests on the morrow. The sun overhead was munificently hot. The bower was green below. Dee ran brown over the pebbles, or sulked black in the pools.

In the Bower I sat a long while—alone, breathing the summer air, warm-scented off the flowers, and cool off the water, as it came to me in alternate whiffs and little uncertain breezes from every quarter. I could hear the far-off clatter of the men arranging the tents, hauling at ropes and singing catches as they pulled. Opposite, in the meadows of the Lochar, scythes flashed in rhythm; and once, keen as a bird's cry, a mower sharpened his scythe with his white "strake." The note set me on edge, and when James suddenly pushed aside the green branches, I leaped to my feet with a cry and my hand hard set against my heart.

He ran to me and clasped me to him.

"I have affrighted you, little dove," he said. "I can see your heart beat. There—on your white throat, it flutters like a bird."

But I put out my hand, firmly resolved to keep him at a distance. "Bide where you are, James, good cousin," I said; "these are privileges neither cousinly nor yet fraternal!"

"Margaret, I love you," he cried, and this time (I do him the justice) he was pale to the lips; "you will never love Will. You do love me. Even yet, say but the word, and I will carry you off and maintain you in France—aye, with the strong hand! The king offered me service there. He will not deliver the Duchy of Touraine to Will. First, because he is in the favour of the Dauphin, and, moreover, he is like to grow too powerful. Second, neither Charles of France nor Louis his son desire another Duke of the Orient on their hands. Bur-

gundy is thorn enough in their sides without a Will Douglas in Touraine."

"And what has that to do with us?" I asked him.

"This," he went on, speaking hot and fast: "the Queen talked long with me that day when Dame Sorel and you went off together. On the part of the King she offered me high command and good service. 'You could lead men,' she said. 'You can drive a good lance—I know.' Let us take the Queen at her word, little Margaret, you and I! Let us go to France. There is a sea-captain at the Ross of Kirkcudbright waiting for a word to transport us to Nantes. And Will hath it not in him to pursue. He will take your provinces and be content."

"But, James," said I, to try him—not in the least that I thought of agreeing to go, "no priest would marry us, if we were ten times in France."

"Why, am I not your cousin even as Will was?" he said. "I'faith, be not afraid, the King of the Scots would help along anything that would help keep Will's estates and yours apart, and for that matter so too would the King of France. Fear you nothing at all, little one! Come with me to the Queen at Amboise. She will care for you, and, I swear by sacred honour that I will wait faithfully till we have the same permission from Rome to marry, that Will hath now in his pouch."

As he was speaking his face was perfectly white, and that indeed was the best thing I had yet known about James Douglas. I saw of a truth that he loved me greatly. This time it was not an affair of a moment with him. And I was sorry for James—yes, and a little sorry for myself as well, being so hemmed in on every side.

Yet somehow now he did not stir my heart—not as he had done before in the Lady's Bower. It was not, as formerly, the hour of my weakness. I saw that a woman may not do as a man. She cannot slip aside from duty for the sake of pleasure as a man may—and often does—yet suffer no shame. She must follow—because she is a woman—the higher things. It is her wierd, and was laid upon her along with the Eden pain. Her path is narrow and the thorns hedge it about.

"James," I said, gently laying my hand upon his shoulder, "it is my turn to be strong. This that you propose would ruin more than you and me. It would bring to the ground that great House whose blood is in our veins, in yours as in mine.

"You are a Douglas of the younger line, I the last of the elder branch. The traitor's axe cut off both my brothers. The Stewarts desire to come between, to divide the inheritance of the Douglases. They thought that their work was done when the blade, already red, fell on the neck of the Earl, my brother, in the accursed Castle of Edinburgh. To me, a girl and at that time a babe, the half would go, and that half the richer and stronger. Your father, a slack man, and an old (I speak it not unkindly), would take the remainder.

"But this they did, they and the lick-platter, knavish councillors, without at all counting on what hath been the Douglas strength. '*Douglas, Douglas, haud thegither!*' That has been the gathering word of our folk, and so it shall be yet, dear James. I was but a lass when this heritage came to me, but, by the Lord and the Virgin, I will also 'haud it thegither'!"

"But you do not love Will?" said James, looking up with a face still white and working.

"No," said I, "I do not love him. What chance has he given me to love him? I am to him even as a new province or a few thousand hackbutmen. No, I do not love him. But that is nothing to the point. You, too, are a Douglas, and if the Stewarts pressed us, would not you close your helmet-bars, and, drawing the great two-handed sword that Malise made you, lay on for the honour of the House? Or, spear in rest, would you not charge in the great and bloody day so long as strength and life remained to you? You know that you would. Why, then, may not a weak girl do what she can? give the thing she has. Are there no battles for her to fight, alone, with none to help or hear—the heavens deaf, the earth iron, the night about black, with a darkness that may be felt?"

I could hear James Douglas sobbing. I know not that

he understood my words; they were above him. He was not of great subtlety, being, as it were, built of rough, gross elements, strong and salt of flavour in word and deed. Nevertheless, something moved him, perhaps no more than that he knew at last that in no case would I marry him, but would carry out my promise to Will, whatever might be the cost to myself.

So hearing that, by what upturning of the heart of a woman I cannot tell, a wave of pity for this man swept over me. It was not that my purpose weakened. Only —it seemed that somehow I must needs comfort my ancient friend. How vain my thought was I know now. Men compacted like James Douglas need comfortings rough-rasping to the senses. Baked meats and dainties are thrown away upon them. Of honey comfits and conserve of rose leaves, sugar wafers filled with quince, seeded pomegranate jelly and stoned black cherries of Gascony—bah, they say, is this meat for men?

But these things I knew not then. I learned his taste later. This it was.

Salt beef biting with cabbage-wort and onions, cold pork and garlic thereto, a horn-spoon and a potful of bone broth or cockyleekie hot off the fire, even a great platter of oat porridge with ale in a bicker—such-like made our James's concept of pleasant things. And his taste in eating is an allegory of his taste in other things. A big, lordly, overlording man that loved his bellyful of lustihood—to eat when he was hungry, drink when thirst nipped him, carry off on his saddle-bow the woman who pleased him, to swagger before all men as Saul among the people, haler, heartier, stronger, taller by a head than any there—these things made life for James Douglas, and for the many James Douglases of the world.

This being so I wasted delicate words on him.

"James," I said, "were I free to choose—I do not know —I might——"

Then in a moment I knew that I had done wrong, and that, though I might love James Douglas, he would never understand me.

For he took me in his great arms like a child and kissed

me—just because I had said that—and hesitated. A man will never learn—at least, not such men as James. They are the bandits of love, and take silly women by brigandage. Strangely enough some of us like it.

But not I—not I. That I did—in the end—come to think otherwise of the marauder was for altogether another reason. I do not know exactly what, but that it was another reason—of that I am sure.

So being held fast and kissed often, it was natural that I should struggle to be free—to cry out. But I might as well have rebelled against the pillory on the Villeins' Hill, had I been set there. And my most touching protestations had as much effect on James Douglas as upon the headsman of Thrieve the appeals of some suffering wretch hard gripped by the law.

"Say you love me, then!" he said, smiling at me; "you said that if you had a choice, you would——"

"*Would hate you,*" I cried furiously, "and I do."

"Aye, you would hate me if you had a choice," he said, with unexpected subtlety, "but you have not. You love me therefore. Say it!"

"I will not say it! I love you not. I would die first!"

"Then you shall stay here till you do!"

For that I do not think I hated him so very much as I ought. His arms were so strong, and yet he held me gently. He had somehow "the airt o't." There are worse things in the world. And besides he was my cousin and playmate.

So I said that which he wished me to say—only, of course, to get away. But, all the same, I said it. At that he kissed me greatly, fiercely—so that my head swam. There came a singing in my ears that was not the murmur of the Dee Water. For a moment I seemed almost to lose consciousness. For there are times when James does not know how strong he is.

Then when I came to myself, being still held in his arms, there before us stood William Douglas, within two yards, his hand upon his sword-hilt and his face like to the face of the dead.

CHAPTER XV

THE GREAT HEART OF A MAN

FOR a moment we stood there gazing at each other—thus. William Douglas was bareheaded, looking, as I remember, in his dress of black, simple as any squire. Yet in spite of all, James Douglas did not let me go. Courage of certain kinds he did not lack.

As for me, how I summoned myself to meet the ordeal I cannot now recall. I can remember only that through the first numbing chill of feeling that all life was overturned and changed, there shot a kind of thankfulness that it had come—*before* and not after.

William Douglas might do with me what he listed. But at least he would know. There was comfort in that. And so for the breathing of twenty breaths, slowly respired, we stood facing one another without moving.

Then Will lifted his hand from his sword-hilt and pointed to the entrance of the Bower.

"Go!" he commanded in a hard, bitter voice, not loud, but low and penetrating.

And James with his arm still firm about my waist, never blenched or even quivered.

"No, brother Will," he answered, "I will not go and leave you with—Margaret!"

"Margaret is my promised wife of to-morrow," said William Douglas. "I have had little private converse with her. I desire a word or two here and now! Go!"

"I stay to defend the woman I love, and the woman who loves me!" said James, looking his brother in the eye. Douglas to Douglas—they stood—and a Douglas between! I could not help wondering what would come out of that—yes, even at the moment I wondered. But then I could never have devised anything so marvellous as has indeed come to us three.

"I do not lift my hand upon a woman," said Will. "You may leave Margaret Douglas with me and safely. You have said your say. I have heard. Now, I have somewhat to add. Go and help them with the banquet tent yonder. I shall be with you later!"

And his eyes, till now steady and black as night, snapped upon his brother.

Still James hesitated. I think it was in his mind to poignard his rival. For with his free arm I could feel him grip nervously at the handle of his dagger—his mind evidently divided within him, wavering this way and that.

"Go," said William, without raising his voice. "I am the Douglas!"

The loyalty to the Head of the House, which James had sucked in with his mother's milk, had the mastery. He went out, clicking back the dagger into its sheath and never once looking behind him.

So in these unimaginable circumstances I, Margaret Douglas, was left alone with the man who was to be my husband on the morrow. I stood wavering, about midway betwixt crying out nervously and fainting away. Had I not been a girl and innocent, I should assuredly have done the latter. For to faint in a man's arms takes the edge off his anger, no matter how bitter it may be—even as a sleeping draught of the apothecary dulls the ill-dreams of the night.

But this I did not know, and so sate me down of my own accord on the seat of rough boards which James had put up in the Bower. I only leaned back and breathed deeply with my eyes shut, for a period which seemed to be measured by years and ages. And all the while William Douglas kept his black eyes steadily on me, so that I could feel them even through my closed lids.

All at once a swift and strange anger against him surged up in my heart.

After all, had he the right? Marriage, indeed, he had spoken to me of. Once he had said that he "loved" me. But how? So that I could almost have laughed at the word. No, he would not terrify me. I was a Douglas as well as he. Therefore I rose—a little unsteadily, I

fear, in spite of all my courage, and, walking to the river edge, I dipped my kerchief in the clear brown Dee Water.

With this I dabbled my face well, and let it drip, cooling the palms of my hands. I was determined that Will, whatever he might do or say to me, should not have the advantage because of any girlish weakness on my part.

But I own, in spite of my preparedness, that what he did say to me took away my breath. That he should have slain me with his hand or sent me to a convent for my life's term would have surprised me less. Douglases had done as much before to their women folk, even after they had been wedded a long time.

"I have spoken with Mistress Maud Lindsay," he said. "She it was who bade me come to this place—*because I would not believe!*"

Then I sprang to my feet. Hot anger ran white as molten metal from my brain to my heart, and from my heart to my finger-tips.

"Maud—my Maud Lindsay, whom I trusted—believed my only friend—to betray me!" I cried.

"Nay," he said in the same voice, low, even, and a little chill, "not your only friend, not yet a traitress. Your best friend—*save, perhaps, one!*"

I do not know that for a long minute my brain took any meaning from these words. They might have been Latin, like the monk's songs, for all they conveyed to me. But slowly there dawned the hope, inexpressible, unbelievable, that knowing all, William Douglas was not angry with me.

I asked him in as many words. But as I drew nearer I saw him shrink away a little—unconsciously, as I now know, but as I then thought because James had so recently held me in his arms.

"Angry with you, child?" he said, his voice vibrating strangely; "nay; but my eyes are opened."

"It was nothing," I said, trying to speak lightly. "James was but bidding me farewell. He teased and craked like a scarecrow in the corn-fields till I had perforce to let him kiss me. I did wrong."

William Douglas waved his hand, as if all that I spoke of was an afterthought, a nothing, even as I had said.

"My eyes were opened wide before ever I came hither," he said; "hitherto I have walked in darkness. But Maud Lindsay has made me see!"

I waited for that which should come next.

"Child," he went on again, "I wonder if you will understand? I fear not. The matter is too great for you. But at first, when she spoke, I would not believe that you could think of another. Love, betrothals, marriage, the hope of children born to the House of Douglas: these had always appeared to my mind as so many links in a chain, a chain which was to bind you and me for always. To me, you have been all my life the Little Maid whom I used to see on my visits to Thrieve. But I forgat (having, indeed, many things upon my mind) that now you had grown into a woman; that you needed other love, other care; that if I did not speak—well, there were others less tied of tongue!"

I did not speak, for, indeed, he seemed to be speaking as much to himself as me. Presently, I think, his mood changed. He sat down near me, and let his words fall with a commoner and more friendly accent.

"'Your fault,' said Maud Lindsay, 'all your own fault, William Douglas!' I agree! Only, you see, I did not know. But it is a crime for a man not to know. A man is maimed who goes through life thus, with eyes that tell him nothing of women, scarce even the colour of their hair, or whether the blush on their cheek is for his own incoming or for that of another man!"

"William," I said, "I promised that I would be a true and good wife to you. I have continued to intend no less. Is that enough for you and me? We need not expect great things of each other!"

He smiled very sadly.

"No," he said. "I am well served. In my folly I thought it was enough to tell a girl that I loved her, knowing that one day she was to be my wife, and that then I could tell her better. Listen, child—what I say is strange. I love you. I love you as James yonder will

never love you—no, nor any woman. He hath it not in him. Nevertheless I know—I have seen—I have heard—the thing Maud Lindsay told me, that your love is not for me! Not now, my child—not ten years hence—not for ever!"

I laid my hand on his, and I think that I must have sobbed aloud. "I do love you, cousin Will—as—*as much as I can.*" These were the words I said.

He touched the back of my hand gently. Then, stooping, he kissed it, laying it back again on my lap. But there was no caressing in his touch, only somewhat of that sad tenderness with which we resign our best loved dead to the white swathings and the hollow falling of the clods.

"Yes," he said, "that is it in a word. You have said it—'as well as you can'—so you would love your husband. It is a true word. But I saw your eyes as you lay in my brother's arms. That is another sort of love—something I shall never know—shut away from me—lost for ever. And by my own fault. I have chosen the worser part, of that I do not doubt. But such as it is—'tis too late to go back upon it now!"

I had no word to say. For though there was no right tenderness for William Douglas in my heart—not, at least, such as he spake of—I could not love him as my husband—no, not if he had been the angel Gabriel, with all the virtues of heaven thick upon him. I am of the earth, earthy, and it was the chief of my good qualities that I was ever candid enough to acknowledge it.

"Listen, child," he said again, and as he spoke all his great, clean, over-burdened soul seemed to unroll itself before my vision, "to-morrow I will wed you before the priest. The wheel of fate cannot go back. So much must be, if all I have striven for—all that your two brothers died for, is not to be lost in the ruin of our House. But I will hold you sacred—yes, even as my sister, even as my mother, until the day of my death. I am a strong man and able for this thing. Also, William Douglas was not made for a long life. He fights with principalities and powers and shall die—though in his

death (I who speak see it) Scotland shall be new-born. Will you help me in this?"

"I do not wholly understand," I said, "but at least I will do all you wish, so be that you are not angry with me for—for—caring about James! It is only a little and I could not help it."

I think he winced at this.

"Nay," he said. "You I do not blame at all—and James not greatly. He is as incapable of refraining from the making of love, as I——"

"Of making it!" said I, smiling at my cousin for the first time. It may not be too late; who knows? You should go to school to James!"

"I have had one lesson," he answered, not giving me back my smile, yet not rejecting it, "it is enough. For me, I will hold to the word I have spoken. To-morrow is our wedding-day. When we are once married, you and I —I shall order it so that James shall ride off as upon a report of danger to the Upper Ward and I follow him immediately to Douglas Castle. Meantime, I will leave you here with Maud Lindsay for your guardian. It shall never be said that William Douglas took what was another man's—that is, with knowledge and intent. As for James, I will speak with him apart. Till we meet at the altar, Margaret, I bid you farewell!"

And as he said, even so he did.

CHAPTER XVI

A MARRIED MAID

EVEN yet of the marriage and all that concerns it, I cannot bear to speak at length.

It was done, and as to that there was an end. I was left alone, at once a wife and a maid—the wife of William Douglas and the betrothed of James, his brother, with the full knowledge of both! Was ever girl so bestead?

What Will had said to James I knew not at that time—nor, indeed, till long afterwards, and then perhaps coloured by time and the personality of the narrator. Briefly, however, the two men were of an accord.

To James Douglas, till his brother's death, Thrieve was a shut door. I laughed a little when I heard it, baldly stated by Will as a thing certified and agreed upon. For I could imagine very well James's wry face, and the ill grace with which he would bind himself to that compact.

"But," said the Earl William, with some philosophy, "the arrangement is good for both—I gain an arm, and James will have the advantage of a head——"

"And I?" I asked of him quickly, "what do I gain?"

He glanced at me simply and without suspicion.

"You will gain that which you yearned for—liberty."

I pointed about the circumference of the Isle of Thrieve, round and round.

"There," said I, "that is your liberty—a prison of twenty acres!"

William Douglas smiled. We were in the banqueting tent, sitting apart—and I daresay the guests thought that, as we raised our eyes to each other, we spoke of the light things of lovers, masking our hopes with glances and happy laughters, our anticipations with the touches of hands beneath the table board.

"Maud Lindsay finds it enough!" he said, slowly. And I think that for once he spake to try me.

"I wot well," I answered, giving him back glance for glance. "She hath here all that she desires, husband, bairns, housewifery, love——"

"*Well?*" he questioned, with some hidden meaning of his own in the word.

And I think he meant that even then I also might have all these if I chose. But if such was his intent, I knew not what was for my good. Will Douglas, if he believed this thing, had spoken too late. What he asked (if so be that he asked it) was no longer mine to give. And the fact that I was not sure *whose* it was did not help Will's case at all. At any rate it pertained not to William Douglas.

Laurence McKim had come to the wedding after all, and throughout the ceremony (in which he took no part, being, though an abbot, only in deacon's orders) I was conscious of his pale face, fine and clear in outline as the carving of a statue. Behind, in the groomsman's place, James gloomed and glowered, seeming even then to meditate flinging me across his horse's croup, and galloping out upon the road for the Little Ross on the chance of the vessel that was to take us into the roads of Nantes.

Before he departed I demanded of Will where were the boundary posts of my liberty, what I was to say to my jailors when I desired permission to cross the drawbridge, or if (upon disobedience) I was to have Black Archibald's dungeon with bread and water. Yes, it was thus that I spoke when I was young. Time and the flux of things have made me sorry enough for it now. But during those years I am sure I had no particle of gratitude, and I am not even sure that I had any heart.

But Will answered quite gravely that Sholto and his two hundred men would be at my service if I desired to ride any considerable distance. Also that, as far as concerned the braes of Galloway, from Palnure to Carsethorn, and from the Ross to the Merrick foot, all was as safe for me as if I had been one of these bairns of

Maud Lindsay's that scampered and made daisy chains upon the green pied leas of Balmaghie and the Isle.

I looked across at James, as Will mentioned the Ross. I meant to remind him that all might not be as safe for me as the Earl imagined. So, to reassure him, I added that I did not intend to be carried off twice to France, but would cling to Maud Lindsay's tails close as a burr in a frieze coat.

"And then I can have Laurence sometimes, is it not so?" I asked. "He reads tales out of the Latin and tells them to Maud and me in the summer gloomings. Is it permitted to your prisoner that she should speak with Laurence when he comes over from Sweetheart?"

"Aye, surely," said William Douglas, carelessly, "have all the monks of Dundrennan if it be any pleasure to you, child. Let them tell you tales by the league—Laurence or another; 'tis all the same to me!"

For he had it not in him to be jealous of any—least of all of Laurence McKim. And, indeed, what call had he? For did not he ride away, free even as he left me behind him free, bidding me company with all, save only his brother James? For that was the agreement that the brothers had made between themselves.

It was the deed of a great heart—though, perhaps, a somewhat cold one. Still, it made of James Douglas, almost to a certainty, ninth Earl of Douglas. It was something to wait for—two-thirds of Scotland—with a widow that had never been a wife into the bargain. Certes, a noble gift! Yet for all that, James Douglas only gloomed, thinking of the present, and looking as sulky as a dog from whom a stranger has taken a bone. But that was James's way all the days of him.

Then William seemed to recall something to himself.

"Laurence McKim," he said meditatively, "yes—yes, that is well thought on. I am glad you spoke of him. He is a man of many books, and will be good company for you all. I will see to it—I will see to it immediately."

He knitted his brow, as he did over great problems of the state, yet he was only thinking for my comfort. And I all the while as cold as a stone and as ungrateful.

He went on, "Also there is Malise over at the Carlinwark—by the Three Thorns. And did one not tell me of a girl there of your own age or younger. What is her name? Magdalen, was it not? A maid with a rare beauty of promise! She will keep you company, and help you in summer with the flower-gathering, and at your broidering over the winter fire!"

At that I pouted. It was good of Will, doubtless; but as for me, I have always found both these occupations go better in company with a man than with any girl, of beauty how rare soever.

"I was very happy as I was," I said; "why had you to come and make me marry you, only to ride away, you and James, leaving me with women and babies?"

"Child," he said, a little drily, "you will find the Bower as it was. It looks to the north, and commands a fine prospect!"

But I still was ill-satisfied, thinking of myself, and taking no account of his irony.

"Well, there is no one to speak with," I complained, "you take away James."

"Yes," he answered, with mighty sudden gravity, "I take away James. I choose not that—my wife—should go to the Lady's Bower with James Douglas, not if he were twice and three times my brother!"

"And Laurence?" I asked, determined to be as bitter with him as I could, though I cannot tell why, save that the events of the day had been too much for me.

"Oh," he answered carelessly, "Laurence McKim, or the collie dog from the Mains, or Puggy the monkey, from the guard-hall—have whom you will at the Lady's Bower! But as for my brother, let him bide his turn! I am doing enough and more for James Douglas!"

And at that I laughed. For, apart from the strange, pleasureable fear I had of James, and so far as good company was concerned, in my heart I preferred to be with Larry. For William had spoken truth. It was as safe to be with Laurence as with the collie from the Mains.

All the same I did not think Laurence would have liked

to be told of it, nor yet would James have been flattered to know that it was a certain relief to my heart, great and definite, to see them both ride away over the hills towards Douglas Castle.

Then the stillness settled down. The tents were struck, the ground cleared—the revellers departing as they had come to their keeps and peel-towers. There fell a deep peace—a Sabbath on the land. So still was it after their way-going, that often the ringing of the kirk-bell at Balmaghie could be heard for vespers or prime, Sir Harry the parson doubtless pulling himself at the rope.

It was indeed almost like the days at St. Brigida's come again. Only, and it was a great difference—at Thrieve there was no Bald Cat and no hateful espionage. Also there were men sometimes, though only Laurence and Sholto counted very much—or rather to speak truth, Laurence—that is, if he would only have come.

As for Maud, she grew sweeter every day. She made herself winsome and beloved by women and that easily. For me it is different—I have found only a few women, not more than I could number twice over upon the fingers of a hand, who were even tolerable to me. But with Maud it was all different. She not only endured all women, but with her motherly ways, won them to love her too. And yet I can recall her in her youth, as great a petticoated rogue and villain as the best! For I never had it in my heart to tease men as Maud Lindsay was used to do. Yet a home, a husband and wealth of children may make the most daring of us even as Maud Lindsay!

Now the men had not long gone when I began to bethink me of what Will, my husband, had said as to company and riding—that all was safe in Galloway, and that he had left me a fair white mare of Arab blood, fine and gentle-pacing as a Spanish jennet, yet when fretted, fiery as Varlet after he had been in stable for a week—my dear old Varlet that of his courtesy Sieur Paul was keeping for me at Cour Cheverney lest I should again find myself in the land of France.

On Haifa then (for so out of the old crusading histories I had named the little mare) I could go everywhere, and

Sholto soon found that it was no heavy-haunched charger of the lists that could hold its own with the blood of Arabia.

But Maud Lindsay, for whose little finger Sholto cared more than for my whole body, was mounted on a steed that paced like a packman's pony well laden with creels. Rouncey was the fitting name, given in derision, which this broad-backed, sure-footed beast of burden bore. Haifa could ride about and about the padding brute as a deerhound circles a charging ox. I think, however, that our Maud was none the best pleased to be thus made a matron of, while the earliest autumn of her beauty was yet far to seek. But it was all owing to Sholto's affection, which fussed and fumed over her like a hen over ducklings. And as often as she went riding with me, it was ever "Be wise now, Maud! Let not that madcap lead you into wild tricks!"

The first of our adventurings was on the day after they had ridden away—Will and James together over that hill, which we called the Hiding Hill, because behind it many and many a Douglas has passed in his time, watched by the eyes of loving women to the last flutter of his cap and the last gleam of the spearhead as it dipped and rose, and—dipped again.

But this time, strangely enough, the two women in Thrieve were glad to see the men depart.

Maud heaved a sigh and threw up her hands, pressing her temples as if to still an ache or to be rid of an anxiety.

"I thought he was never going to understand," she said. "If I had not seen James follow you across the meadow and round the willow copses towards the Lady's Bower, I had surely been at my wits' end. So I sent him after you twain!"

"For me," said I, "I know not whether it was well or ill done of you!"

Maud looked a while at me fixedly, at first with a certain vexation, but afterwards gradually breaking into a smile, serene as gracious.

"Ah," she said, "I was wrong. I took you for a child,

but you are a woman for all that with your reasons and counterings. If you have a thing given you, you mislike it. If you get it not, that you like worse. But if, having cast it away as worthless, it will not come back, being whistled for—*that* you like worst of all! This it is to be all a woman! A very woman!"

CHAPTER XVII

THE COTTAGE BY THE THREE THORNS

It was with some anticipation, but, still more, I think, with that exaltation which comes from swift movement in the open air, that Maud and I started to ride the half league which separated us from the cottage of the Three Thorns.

It was mid-August—that is to say, high summer in Scotland, for the beauties of this our dour land develop late. But there were now crops along the river bank, other than the daisies pied and winking gowans which had greeted me on my return from France, corn still green in the hollows, but thinning out and yellowing on the brae-faces, besides a hundred flowers all along the way we went. I had quite forgot the country names of most of them, though I could have given the most part of them in the French tongue readily enough.

There was a scent of delightful warmth, rare in Scotland, over everything. The morning mist, which heat draws from the ground in the moist south-west, had not yet wholly lifted. Except to children and lovers, the way through the marshes was always a little tedious, because of the need of searching out the best path across the peaty flowes, and of keeping to those bare patches of soil on which only tufts of heather and bent grew.

Then we mounted the hill, from which we could see the three famous Thorn Trees of Carlinwark, beside which Malise McKim had dwelt all his life. He had, it is true, a much finer house at Mollance, a league and a half up the valley; but nothing contented the old man truly but the armourer's house by the waterside, with the Isle of Firs in front of the door, immediately under the blue barn roof of Screel, and the sound of the water crisping

and whispering on the pebbles along the shores of Carlinwark.

Malise McKim, chief Armourer-Smith to the Douglases, met us by the door, his vast leathern apron about his middle. He showed himself a gnarled and knotted trunk of a man, with a face in a general way soberish, but upon occasion gravely mirthful as well, and even in repose showing a capacity for humour essentially Scottish.

He tossed his bonnet on the ground and stood before us bareheaded.

"That is where I should be, too, if I had not grown so thick-about, my lady Countess," he cried; "bide ye still where ye are, Sholto's Maud! First I bode to rax doon my bonnie! Sit your fit there!"

He thrust out a hand towards me—a hand broad as an oaken trencher from the servants' hall. I put one foot into it, and with a touch of my hand, as it were on a mountain side, upon the shoulder of the giant, I found myself on the ground.

He laughed a low satisfied grumbling laugh.

"Aye," he chuckled, "the Wee Yin hasna forgot the airt o't. She has minded auld Malise, that stood afar aff and saw her married to his maister yester-morn. But, wae's me, siccan a bride-beddin'! They tell me the Earl William rade awa' that verra nicht to Douglas Castle and left ye bird-alane! It canna be true!"

"Hush, father," said Maud, hastily, "come and help me down. There were tidings of great danger in the Upper Wards—that Crichton and Livingstone were even then besetting Douglas Castle with a great army! You speak of things concerning which you have no knowledge!"

For so it was ever Maud Lindsay's way to manage and mistress everyone. As many as possible she caused to do her will by simple ordinance, as she did with Sholto, or by alternate *manège* and the curb rein, as she had been wont to do with her lovers of old—now, however, mostly by wheedling and cajolery, or if no better might be, by the argument of tears, or that soft inveiglement and the attractive forces of those little kindnesses which touch and win a woman most from one of her own sex.

Old Malise lifted his daughter down, lightly and easily as he had done for me—though Maud had begun to pay the penalty of comfort and a home, with maternity and the happy care of children. In brief, she was no longer willow slender or quite feather-weight.

Now to me it was greatly pleasant to see again this grizzled giant, whom I but dimly remembered, his arms knotted and massy as the branches of an oak, smiling upon us—ready at once to give us of his best, or to lay down his life for either of us if need were.

"But why," said I, "have we not to seek you at your new abode? Is not the Mollance a pleasant place to dwell in? If not, then we must e'en seek you another. Do you not know that the Douglas will be behadden to none, not even to an old friend?"

"Pleasant to the e'e, and heartsome—aye," said the old armourer, "but the Mollance will never be hame to me. Some o' thae daftlike young folk o' mine will doubtless set up their canopied bedposts there. But there shall be nae hame for the auld smith but aneath the Three Thorns where he was born. There shall he leeve and there (God sainin' him) will he dee, and when they carry him awa' feet foremost, he will be buried oot yonder on the Kelton braefaces, wi' the glint o' rain and sunshine comin' and gangin', as if the Head Smith o' a' were hard at it, blawin' the bellows o' the wunds athort the lowin' coals o' the cloods o' even. Hoots—there I am at it again, bletherin' fule words aboot the cloods."

He turned with a perfect whirlwind of a voice, cried aloud, "*Guidwife, are ye there?*"

"Here I am, Laird McKim," replied another voice of almost equal volume from behind the peat-stack, "but I wad hae ye ken that golderin' like a Bull o' Bashan is in no way to caa' for the leddy o' the Mollance. Do ye think that I, Dame Barbara o' that ilk, am but a tinkler's wife for a' the warld to scraich at?"

"And 'deed what better are ye?" said her husband, subduing his voice to shorter range. "Ye are just puir auld Babby Kim, the smith's wife at the Three Thorns! And," suddenly sending his voice outward in a gust of

sound, *" gin ye dinna come oot frae ahint that peat-stack this minute—faith, I'se come an' fetch ye like a clockin' hen!"*

"The poo'er is no gien ye by the Almichty, Laird McKim," said the voice, "'Brawny' though they caa' ye! Ye mind what happened to that black scoondrel Ham for makkin' a shame an' a lauchin' stock o' his faither, and faith, it wad be waur for you to do the like to your douce marriet wife! Gang your ways intil the hoose an' bid Magdalen bring me my paduasoy goon and my white mutch. For I'm juist no fit to be seen, as weel ye ken, me bein' a laird's wife, an' forbye, the mither o' a beltit knicht an' an Abbot o' Sweetheart Abbey. A bonny-like thing for a graund body like me to be catchit in an auld slip body and clogs, feedin' the pigs! Gang your ways and find Magdalen—hear ye me, Malise McKim?"

"But, guidwife," said Malise, with something like a wink across at us, "I'm some feared that Magdalen is gane to the far park yont the hill, to gather the white rose and the reid! Ye wull hae to come out as ye are, guidwife, I'm thinkin'!"

"Deil o' that I'll do, Laird McKim!" cried the lady, while we waited smiling. I had signalled to Maud to be still, for, indeed, the words, and the very lilting strain of the voice when in pretended anger, recalled old things to me. For this same Dame Barbara had been my foster-nurse, even as she had been that of my two dead brothers, whom the Crichton slew so cruelly at Edinburgh. "Deil o' that," she repeated; "gang yoursel', my man, to the armoire, an' tak oot the paduasoy and the white mutch that hangs on the peg, a' goffered an' daintied! And mind ye that your hands are well washen, ye great muckle, hulkin' blackamoor that ye are! For gin ye fyle a single kep-string or bowed puff, I'se——"

"Mother," said Maud Lindsay, suddenly, "let me go if you need such-like, but do not forget that you are keeping the Countess of Douglas waiting!"

"The Countess o' Douglas? Wha's she?" (There was a sudden change in the voice.) "No, my wee Margaret.

her that lay at my breests, that was unto me as my ain—aye, an' maybes mair—the last left o' the bonny three that were bane o' my bane an' flesh o' my flesh, as say the Scriptures!"

"Even so, Dame Barbara!" I cried. "If you will not come to see your foster-bairn, faith, blithely will I kilt my coats, and help you to feed the pigs—as I have done before, dear mother of mine, many and many a time!"

There reached us a sound of feet heavily plashing, excited breathings that came short and fast, then finally from behind the peatstacks Dame Barbara appeared with her sonsy arms outspread to enfold me. A blue linen gown was broadly belted about that part of her body which it was a misuse of words to call her waist. A kilted skirt of rough frieze descended a little, a very little, below her knees, showing rig-and-furrow stockings of blue wool, and sturdy feet thrust into the huge wooden shoes, called "clogs"—a sort of left-handed cousin, I take it, of the *sabot* of Touraine.

"Oh, my ain wee bairnie," she cried, "I wad hae kenned ye afar aff. There's nane like ye! But I canna touch ye the noo. I declare I am a fair disgrace to be seen—me that micht hae been sittin' in the bonnie hoose o' Mollance——"

"Aye," said her husband, "twiddlin' your thumbs roond yin anither like a millwheel in a spate an' wishin' that ye had the Carlinwark pigs to feed!"

"Ye needna think, muckle sumph that ye are," retorted Dame Barbara, "that because ye canna pit by a day withoot the smell o' apron leather, an' the foost o' het pleuch-irons fizzlin' in the cauldron, that me, who is ain sister to a Provost o' Dumfries, has nae mair respectable thochts in my heid!"

But having once felt my arms about her, the good Dame of Mollance easily forgat the imperfections of her attire, and alternately wept and laughed over me, now holding me at arm's length to admire, and anon reflecting with some breadth upon the supposed ill-conduct of my husband in leaving me alone so soon after our marriage.

"Body an' breath o' haly Patrick," she cried, "it wasna dune that gate in my young time—by gentle nor yet by simple. But wae's me, wae's me, the times are sair changed—and wi' them the folk. There's even oor wee bit Magdalen, and—Guid forgi'e me, nae sweeter or bonnier maid doffs kirtle at bedtime atween here and John-o'-Groats—though I say it that shouldna—but even she will gang aff by her lane instead o' dancin' on the green wi' them that are o' her age. Ye will find her ower yonder i' the wild wood or up amang the heather, far far yont, sittin' on a hassock o' bent and listenin' to the laverocks i' the lift, as if she had never heard them afore in a' her life. Aye, aye, puir lassie, an' sae your groom's gane an' left ye, wae's me, wae's me!"

This was the beginning of our daily pilgrimages to see Malise McKim and his wife—and (but that came later) Magdalen, their daughter and their other five sons, Corra, Dun, Herries, Roger, and Malise the Younger. All these, however, were older than their sole sister Magdalen, who, as their mother said, "had arrivit untimely, the child o' oor auld age—the ithers being a' as close on yin anither's tails as a string o' deuks gaun' to the mill-pond." So, as was natural, this one little daughter, the pearl of price, now in her fifteenth year, had drawn to her great store of the love of her parents, and found herself petted and worshipped as a divinity even by her brothers.

Nothing she could do was wrong. So Magdalen McKim grew up encircled by love and what is more and other, by the unfailing expression of love. Her father, who melted to none else, followed her with his eyes as she went about the house. One day (so he said to himself) Magdalen would marry a laird's son and be the Lady of Mollance. For, as for the others, man and boy, they could fend for themselves as their father and mother had done.

But on this first occasion of our going we saw nothing of the maid, the fame of whose beauty, however, had already carried far across the countryside.

Yet I held it strange that as Maud and I overtopped the

little ridge behind the Three Thorns, which is called the Hill of Carlinwark, I seemed to see all suddenly against the sunset the shape of a knight in armour mounted on a noble horse. He was stooping from his saddle to kiss a maiden's hand, which she had rendered to him as if against her will. Both stood out black against the redness of the west, and in a moment they were gone, or at least hidden by a little rising of the ground as we rode on. The sight took my breath away. I must have dreamed it, I thought, for indeed at the time my head was full of visions and hopes and fears. So I said nothing to my companion.

And Maud, full of her babes, paid no attention, or at least she spoke never a word of the event if she saw aught. But to me it seemed that the knight with the black plume and the great square shoulders was of the build, make, and carriage of James Douglas.

Only in my heart I said, "Tush, Margaret, you get your mind too full of James Douglas these days. This must be ended, and suddenly! I will no more on't!"

All the same I thought on the vision afterwards, when I ought to have been asleep in my naked bed.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE PENANCE OF JOCK THE PENMAN

THERE still remained to me to make the acquaintance of the sole daughter of Malise McKim, the sister of Sholto and Laurence. She was not yet sixteen years of age, but already her name had gone wide athwart the country. Yet withal she was a strange girl—with a look on her face like to one who had spoken with the Little People, so they said.

As her mother had told me, she loved the wild wood better than the village street, the heathery hill more than the noise of the market place, the tumult of the fair, or even the genial push and jostle of the tourney when folk of all degrees looked over one another's shoulders.

And still I had not set eyes upon this marvel. But one morning, awaking early, I heard two of our soldiers of the guard—A'Hannays both of them—Gib the Brown and Kirsten the Red, exchanging confidences on the stone balcony beneath my chamber, where their watch had been set by Sholto McKim.

They had taken leave to rest their halberds in a corner, and to lean upon the balusters with their elbows (God help them if Sholto, or even Andro the Penman came their way!).

"So ye were ower by at the Three Thorns yestreen, Kirsten?" inquired Gib the Brown, starting a subject, which in spite of his air of nonchalance was evidently near his heart. "Saw ye ocht o' the Flooer-o'-the-Haw?"

(For by this name, it appeared the men of the Thrieve guard and the country folk about spoke of the daughter of the armourer.)

The Red one shrugged his shoulders and scratched meditatively.

"The Flooer—no," answered Kirsten softly, "but the Thorn—aye! The Thorn was there!"

"Ye cam' on Malise McKim then!—What said he til ye?"

"'Said,' quo' he," growled Kirsten the Red, "truth o' Peter an' Paul, I didna wait for what he said. I kenned the auld man's fit, and I left—yes, Gib, ye may tak' your oath on that! I left the viceenity!"

"But how kenned ye the fit o' Malise McKim?" inquired Gib.

Kirsten the Red turned upon his kinsman a look of mingled pity and contempt.

"Gib," he said, "it's little that ye ken. I kenned Malise's fit by the sign that it liftit me near sax feet in the air, wi' a spang like a green puddock loupin' into a pool. So I cam' awa'! Aye, Kirsten A'Hennay cam' awa' frae there and waited for nae leave-takkin' either!"

"Umph!" retorted Gib, "but ye are a poor plucked bantam to fight a man. Noo, if it had been me——"

"See here—you," cried Kirsten, the Red A'Hannay, fiercely, "if ye think ye can do mair nor me—come your ways doon to the green yonder when our watch is lifted, and I'll show you. Aye or better yet, gang to the well-yett o' Carlinwark an' gie three whustles like this——"

Here Kirsten imitated the call of the peewit upon the moor with great exactness. Then he laughed. "Saul's health!" he cried, "then ye will ken whether ye are welcome or no at the smiddy o' the Three Thorns—thro' the shape o' the auld man's brogans!"

At this point there was a hurried rush to arms. The sound of footsteps approached from below, halted, again receded. Instantly halberds were grounded—piled, and the peaceful confabulation of the A'Hannays continued over the parapet.

"I say, Gib, she's maist awesome bonny—yon yin!"

"Ye're speakin', Red Kirsten!" replied his cousin. Then with a groan he added, "But, oh man, whiles I'm feared till I sweat that she's no for the like o' us, Gib. There was young Jock the Penman—they say he made up til her yae day on the road to Ba'maghie Kirk—near by the wood o' Lochar. And my faith, I kenna what he said to her, but she bade him gang an' seat himsel' on the

muckle stane in the midst of the ford—they caa' it the Black Douglas, ye ken. And he was to sit there for a day and a nicht withoot speech, or else she wad tell her faither, and her seven brithers the words he had spoken till her!"

"Lord sake, ye tell me sae? And did he gang?"

"Gang, Kirsten!" continued Gib solemnly. "Certes, there was nae two ways aboot that! He sat him doon there, a' disjaskit an' drookit-like (for he had to wade to the oxters and him dressed in his green velvets). Aye, as the stane was marvellous slippery, he had to sit on his hunkers, blinkin' like a hoolet in the sunshine a' the time the kirk folk were guan' by. An' siccan jeerin' and lauchin' as there was at him, hotchin' there, wi' the caller Dee Water sappy and broon about his hurdies, an' the ill-faured laddies frae the kirk-clachan flingin' stanes an' dirt at him! Eh, but it was graund to see!"

Kirsten made silent contortions indicative of delight.

Aye, an' yince he turned his back on the ford, and the lassie McKim (I never thocht she had as muckle spunk in her) garred him turn him again and face the folk as they gaed planterin' an' splashin' through the shallows on horse and on foot. And sae there sat Jock till what time Sir Hairry the parson had said his mass, and the kirk folk were on their road back again. Then Malise McKim spied Maister Jock sittin' a' crowled up on the Black Dooglas—his chin on his knees and dreepin' like sea-weed on a tide-rock."

"'What's that fule doin' there, Magdalen?' said Malise.

"'Had you not better ask him, faither,' said the lass, speakin' mim an' denty like a wee white doo drinkin' water."

"Aye," sighed Kirsten, "she canna help it. It's an airt she haes!"

"'Better ask at him, had I?' growls Malise, 'faith, richt sune I'll do the speerin'.'

"Sae doon he gangs to the water-side on that muckle Flanders beast o' his that wad carry a tun o' wine, and he stands a bit while intent upon the peetifu' object on the

Black Dooglas, lookin' an' aye better-lookin'. An' them that was there telled me that it was better nor a monk's-play, when the black deils come chasin' in after the ill-doers, wi' their reid-het pincers. Ye ken what wi' the sparks o' forty years' smiddwark, Malise wrinkles up his face into knots, and pu's doon his broos till he grins at ye like a fox oot o' a whun bush. This time, they say, he was fair fearsome to see."

"'Wha are ye and what are ye doin' there on the Lord's Day morning?' says Malise in a voice that near shook Jock the Penman aff the stane intil the water. 'Is this the feast o' the King o' Misrule?'

"But Jock he said naething, him kennin' better.

"An sae Malise cries oot again, 'Tell me what for ye are sittin' there like a popinjay on a steeple, makin' yoursel' a cockshy for a' the vagrom bairns and guid-for-naething rake-the-countries in ten pairishes. Is that the way to mak' your maister respeckit?'

"But aye Jock said naething. For the lass was stannin' watchin' on the shore.

"Sae wi' that Malise began to wade in to him on his muckle Flamand. In his hand the smith had a branch o' an oak he had poo'ed in the wood o' Glenlochar, an' as he took his beast into the ford he strippit the cudgel to the white. And because Jock the Penman sat still, because he dauredna steer, the fear bein' on him, Malise lifted him up like a half-drooned kitten, an' cast him across his saddle-bow."

"'I did it for a penance,' says Jock at last, 'it was a vow!' And had the stake been the salvation o' his saul, that was as near the truth as he bode to come that day, whatever.

"But, wae's me, when Malise had brocht him to the shore, there was the lass waitin', and Jock telled me after, that his verra bowels turned to water within him when he saw her. But she only said, calm and saftlike as rain in summer when nae wind is, 'What was it that ye said to me, John the Penman, as ye gaed oot through the woods o' Lochar?'

"An' for the life o' him Jock could think o' naething

better to answer than that he had said it was a bonny day for the folk to gang kirkward, an' sain their sowls hearkenin' to the holy and blessed words o' Mess Hairry, the parson o' Ba'maghie!

"'Nothing more than that?' she said. 'It runs in my head that ye said mair nor that.'

"'Naething,' cries Jock, 'but that if it were the Lord's ain wull, a drap or twa o' water wad be guid for the craps!'

"'Sae ye bode to hae the hale flood of the Water o' Dee to keep yoursel' happy, ye numskull!' said Malise, setting Jock on the ground wi' a shake that garred his teeth chatter in their sockets.

"'And when next you say your prayers for the folk at Mass,' Magdalen put in, 'and for the rain upon the crops, let your place of oratory be other than the middle o' Dee Water, and your *prie-dieu* a fitter place than the Black Douglas o' Glenlochar!'

"'Aye, see to it!' growled Malise. 'Mind what the lass says, or else will I break thy thick head with this cudgel.'"

Then there was a pause as I abode listening. The two men stood silently degusting the tale of Jock the Penman. It seemed to have a personal flavour for them.

"And what think ye, Gib, after a'," said Kirsten the Red, "was it that Jock said to the lass?"

"That," answered Gib, sententiously, "has never been revealed—but——"

"But what?" said Kirsten, whose temper was never of the longest.

"Weel, gin ony body ocht to ken what Jock the Penman said to Magdalen McKim, it should be yoursel', Gib A'Hannay! Ye hae had experience. Tak' my advice, an' keep far yont frae the Three Thorns. They are no a canny set, thae McKims!"

There was silence again from that point for several minutes—a silence strained and disagreeable.

"Ony way," said Gib, breaking it fiercely, "*I* haena been kickit and taen it like a lamb!"

"Hae ye no?" cried his cousin. "Weel, ye'll no hae

that lang to complain o'—there! And there! And there!"

I could hear the rush of the two A'Hannays to the corner where they had piled their arms, and the first click of the halberds as the weapons came to the engage. But as I did not wish two of Sholto's best men put *hors de combat* for a few foolish words, I slipped out on the balcony and called down to them. "Have you seen Sir Sholto McKim? Pray send him up to me?"

They were standing, breathing hard, their heads thrown back, foot to foot, weapon to weapon, as is the way of their fighting race. For the A'Hannays can never hold land long, however they may gain it. They fall a-fighting among themselves when there is none other to strive with, and after the battle the land generally goes to the sole surviving cousin in the twentieth degree of relationship.

So when Gib the Brown and Kirsten the Red saw me, they drew themselves up and saluted.

"Now," I ordered them severely, "let there be no more of this, or I will have you both in the dungeon of Archibald the Grim, on bread and water for a week—aye, and little enough of the first! This is no place for pikes and partisans when every good Douglas is wanted. If ye have aught to say to one another, go down to the green and say it with your fists like men!"

CHAPTER XIX

THE SCENT OF THE WHITE THORN

STILL I had not seen Magdalen McKim.

I was resolved that no longer would I miss my mark. So that very afternoon I sent Andro the Penman, whose swarthy countenance and determinate bachelordom protected him from any misconceptions as to his purpose, on mission to the Three Thorns of Carlinwark.

With him I sent a jewel of price to Magdalen—a cross made of a great moonstone, set about with black diamonds, of Saracen work—brought, so they said, from the Holy Land by some crusading Douglas. And with it I sent the letter which follows:

Sweet Magdalen and my little Foster Sister,—I have heard speak of you, often and mickle. Yet has it never been my lot to see you. Will you bring your Father and Dame Barbara, with as many of your brothers as can be spared, to the Thrieve to-morrow—that I may see you, and know you for, as they report of you, the fairest and honestest maid in Galloway. This I desire all the more, that, before I was wedded and so in one day grew an old woman, folk were used to call me also 'The Fair Maid of Galloway.'

This I signed with the name, which (at that time) I had resolved should never be changed—'Margaret Douglas.' And then I waited, expectant as a lover for the coming of this marvel and non-such—the flower of all the white thorns that ever grew by the shores of Carlinwark.

It chanced that I awoke very early and looked across the little garden, wherein, upon the moist and fertile soil washed by the river, flourished the flowering rush and bachelor's button, with the wild vine of Touraine climbing up the twin ilex oaks, which had been brought all the way from Rome and planted against the warm south-

looking wall of Thrieve. There were open spaces, too, where, kept in countenance by gillyflower and the royal brake, there were beginning to take root those pretty dainty bunches called the "Fair Maids of France," which the Sieur Paul had sent over-seas to remind me of Cour Cheverney.

Only on this southern face, under my window, was there any green leafage about the Castle Thrieve. On every other side the castle rose clear, grey, lonely—a strong tower for defence, a hold against the storms of war, as indeed it had already been for generations—square, bare, and upstanding as if in scorn of compromise.

But now I loved the little garden best of all, perhaps because my dear Lady's Bower was deserted. I had no desire to go thither. Two men seemed to stand between me and it—the two whom I had seen ride away together, each watching the other, behind the fatal Hiding Hill.

It was very early when I looked out on the morning we were to see Magdalen at Thrieve. The river wimpled below, glimmering like the inside of a pearl shell—little flecks of rosy clouds driven up from the east, being, however, smilingly reflected in the grey. I could see the water wander away between the dark meadows till it drew to a point and was lost in the distance. As I leaned from the window of my chamber I felt a damp chill strike suddenly through me. The dew-dropping trees in the little garden shivered, though there was no wind. I also shuddered as if I had been one of them.

Over yonder was the hill of Carlinwark, the clouds of dawn reddening behind it. Why should Fear haunt me and the trees of my garden tremble as if someone were treading upon my grave?

Could aught of evil be coming to me from Over Yonder?

Surely not—only the daintiest, the most innocent, and the sweetest maid in Galloway—Magdalen, the daughter of the armourer of Carlinwark, that rare blossom of the May and the flower of the white and scented thorn.

She came punctually at ten o'clock of the day, her mother Dame Barbara, and Malise her father being with her. I was startled at first. I remembered her as a little child with a floss of golden hair and eyes like the sun shining on a mountain lake—at once dark and bright. There was no doubt about it—little Magdalen McKim had grown into a bewitching woman—yes, a woman, though according to her years and to her cleading, she was yet no more than a child.

Of her complexion she was fair, dazzlingly fair, as blonde as I (being a Douglas) was dark. As to her *coif*, it was marvellous. Each individual hair stood out like a wire of gold, infinitely fine, waving and crisping to her waist. So light the fleece was, the wind blew it this way and that in wisps, as mist is blown about the hill-tops.

In Magdalen's eyes there was the depth of water seen under the shade of great ancestral trees. What colour they were—green, blue, hazel, or violet, I could not tell. Chiefly, I think, they changed according to the thought that stirred behind. The girl's skin was clear and flushed easily to a dainty rose. Something innocent and appealing looked out from under her eyelashes at you, claiming protection even before the full and gracious smile of her mouth had said, "I trust you!"

And so at long and last, here before me, was Magdalen of the Three Thorns.

I went down myself to meet her, but when I would have embraced her first, she directed me to her mother.

"She will be disappointed else!" she whispered, bending from her saddle.

And so I kissed my old nurse first of all, and then holding the girl at arm's length, examined her from head to foot. The time being summer she was clad in plain white linen cloth, fresh from bleaching upon the green grass of the Carlinwark meadows, and her hair was kept from straying by a snood or band of blue ribbon, broader than usual, which passed about her small and shapely head.

With that came Maud out also, smiling sweetly and full of content with her life, her babes, her husband. Maud could think wisely and well for others—witness how she

had thought for me—but really her soul abode within her, content, unfretted, sufficient to itself as that of a good mother should, the young birds being still in the nest.

So we went in, and afterwards Malise came and joined us in the great hall, refusing, however, to sit down in the presence of his mistress.

"The boys?" he grumbled, I might say rumbled, when I had asked him why they had not all come, "na, na—they are better at hame. Twa sons o' mine are lost to the anvil and the hammer. If a' o' them gaed the way of Prior Laurence yonder, and Sir Sholto here—what would come o' the armourer-ship to the Douglases o' Thrieve whilk hath been in my family ever since there was a Douglas to go forth to battle, or a McKim to fit him for it wi' steel harness and sword o' mettle?

"'Na, na, guid lads, bide where ye are,' says I. And guid lads they are. But spoil a McKim an' ye mak' a devil unpitted. So I e'en set them their tasks, and explained what wad happen gin they werena dune by the doon-lettin' o' the nicht!

"'The Lord help ye!' said I. But they kenned fu' weel that He wadna!"

. . . . .

It was to me a day most memorable, that August noon and afternoon when from the Three Thorns of Carlinwark, Magdalen McKim came first into my house of Thrieve. At this distance of time, and after all that is come and gone, it is hard for me to detach myself and convey to those who never set eye upon this girl, any true idea of the wonderful charm of her girlhood.

There have been beautiful and gracious women not a few whom I have seen and known—chiefest, of course, Maud Lindsay and Mistress Agnes Sorel—"La Belle des Belles." But the like of Magdalen McKim as she was at fifteen have I never seen—child-woman and woman-child in one.

I cannot mind me of any great thing we either said or did. We went into the south garden, I know, under the shadow of the Ilex or Lady's Oak, where I had had seats placed. Maud Lindsay came to us time and again as the

duties of her housekeeping and nursery permitted. But mostly she left us alone to make acquaintance, taking Dame Barbara off with her, to count baby linen and appraise napery, while Malise went the rounds of the armoury with his son Sholto, growling at specks of rust to other eyes invisible, and informing the Captain of the Guard for the hundredth time how differently things were managed when he was in residence at Thrieve—"in the Tineman's time," as he was careful to add.

"Doubtless," answered Sholto, growing at last a little nettled, "but then, if our arms are not so clean, we do not lose so many battles with them!"

"But more heads!" growled the ancient armourer in his beard. "And there would have been less of that same if the young Earl William would have taken my advice. But 'tis not too late even yet. Yonder, to begin with, are Chancellor Crichton and Tutor Livingston, that carry on their shoulders a pair of bosses that would be none the worse of a snedding!"

Sholto laughed, placing his hand affectionately on his father's arm.

"But did you ever hear of a right Douglas yet," he said, "that would take advice?"

Malise shook his head, perhaps remembering my brothers. Then he sighed.

"Never if it were guid advice! Or frae a man!" he added, softly, and as if recalling something to his mind, woeful and heavy with Fate.

. . . . .

So in the south garden Magdalen and I sat, the white doves that swooped and circled about, plumping upon the scattered grains of corn, not more innocently happy. I asked her after a while concerning her lovers and the men who came to the Three Thorns to woo her—of whose number and varied qualifications I had heard so great an account.

Magdalen smiled softly, with a swiftly passing reminiscence of her father's humour in her eyes. Then they took on again the misty look of hills seen through an April shower.

"Aye, aye," she said, "there is a deal of work to be done about the armoury—work that takes time, work that has to be waited for. And there are lads, and brisk lads too, that 'cock' their heads out of the smithy door when my mother steps across to the bleaching green, or one of my brothers comes ben for a drink of water. But," here she smiled softly, "since John the Penman did his watery penance on the stone cairn, there has been more of peace about the house-place of the Three Thorns!"

"Who are they that come?" I said, not, I think, out of curiosity, but just because I wanted to know. For the things which happen to one girl always interest another.

So, to encourage her, I told her of Cour Cheverney, of the gallant knights there, and of how I liked Laurence, her brother, best of all. At which she smiled, and had for a moment the same childish, all-forgetful look I had seen in Larry's eyes when he was setting the little mill-wheels to running in the tumble of the Touranian brooks.

Then, very carefully, I spoke concerning William, my husband; of how wise he was, how brave in word and act, praising him at the expense of his brothers, to see what she would say. For women do these things the one to the other. Then, after a silence, my reward came. Magdalen flashed out:

"But was it not true—so, at least, I was told—that Lord James conquered in the tourney, even as, when he was but a boy, he did at Stirling against the knights of Bargandis?"

So with that I turned and said to the girl, "Hath my cousin, James Douglas, by any chance been often over at the Three Thorns?"

But she answered me quiet steadily, with her own sweet and constant humility—a reproof in itself.

"Nay," she said, "he is over great a lord to think of me; nevertheless, I have seen him ride by when I was gathering flowers—yes, ever since I was a little girl, whom he would take up on his saddle before him, being kind. But now that I am too old for suchlike, he will, when he meets, dismount and walk a little way, asking

concernedly for my father and brothers, with whom he was in France, and for whom he cherishes love and affection past the common——!"

"Ah, yes," said I, "such affection is more common than you suppose, sweet Magdalen!"

But even then the girl took no offence, nor dreamed of such a thing as irony, being simple and pure, and set about with strong brothers and a father that had a name upon the earth, whom no man—no, not even James Douglas, would care to cross in his angers. She did not even look up, but went on throwing corn to the doves, pile by pile. For the which Sholto coming in, brother-like, reproved her.

"Ye may do as ye like at the Three Thorns and welcome," he said, "but here I am in charge of the larder of Thrieve. And since it has been prophesied that there shall be a siege of the place within three years, there are horses and men that may be glad of the grain you are flinging so freely to these fat squabs!"

And since it was our Douglas way never to interfere with any man in his jurisdiction and responsibility, I said nothing. Indeed I would have said as little had he reproved me—such being his right and duty.

But Magdalen blushed crimson athwart the white of her cheeks.

"I am sorry, Sholto," she murmured, and then she looked with a certain appeal at me.

"We are all his slaves here," I whispered, "wait till he is gone!"

Then there came a voice from the window above.

"Come up hither an hold the babe while I see to the chambers. These lazy sluts leave half their work undone. This is is to live in a castle with a guard of men-folk in the hall beneath."

We both knew well the voice of Maud Lindsay and very hurriedly and with long strides Sholto departed to do the duty of parent auxiliary.

I laughed aloud when he was fairly gone.

"Ah, little girl," I cried, "it is well that there is some-

thing up yonder which can tame even a captain of the Guard. Hearken!"

And clearly through the open lattice there came the sound of a babe's crying.

"*That* makes us all slaves!" I said. Then at the words I flushed hot as fire.

And swiftly, causelessly, as if also ashamed or affrayed, Magdalen nestled up against me.

CHAPTER XX

INSTRUCTION IN LOVING

It becomes not me to write of the doings of William Douglas—of how he began to realise his ideal, by taking the King out of the hands of Crichton and Livingston, of his being made Lieutenant General of the realm—of how he besieged and destroyed Crichton Castle, and afterwards took that of Edinburgh. Of course, William Douglas would succeed. I never doubted that of him, being my husband.

Twice only did he take me with him when he was received in state, and stood at the King's right hand. But I liked not James Stewart's appearance—no, not though he was a King and twice the descendant of kings. On his face was the birth tache which gave him his nickname—James of the Fiery Face. His temper was naturally uncertain, yet capable of rages which made him dangerous as a cur that runs amuck in the dog-days. Never could I bear the name and kind all the days of me—Stewards and turnspits mating with foreign kings and princes, yet ceasing not to intrigue with the scum and filth of the land, in order to put down their own noblest and bravest. Out upon the Stewarts, I say! And as to this, it was Malise who first opened my eyes.

Sholto was now often away in the north or in Edinburgh and Stirling with the Earl William. For my husband came but seldom to Thrieve since he grew so great in the land, even as it was written that he should. Yet this I think was for my sake, and he never came without bringing me a present of the rarest and best—such things as he knew would please me, curious oriental caskets, egg-shaped, carved out of ivory, carpets of Turkey work, and for myself all manner of beautiful garmentry, which if I had put upon me, I would have been

gayer than the peacock that pivoted his tail upon the sundial in front of the arbour beneath the Ilex in my garden.

I knew he meant to be kind. For ofttimes it seemed that he would arrive at Thrieve with something to say to me, and yet sit in the garden talking of indifferent things, while he took my hand, holding it in his—but only as a cousin might do, even in France. I think he remembered always the Lady's Bower, and what had been said and done there. For me I sometimes wished he had forgotten.

I have said that my south-looking chamber had beneath it a terrace with a balluster, the same whereon I had heard the cousins A'Hannay take up their parable concerning Magdalen McKim. At least it was so, and by opening my window, either in the little outer chamber or in the bedroom one could hear excellently what went on beneath. For my part I did not mean to hearken, but sometimes there was little else to be done at Thrieve.

So one September gloaming—still and gracious it was, I mind it yet—William Douglas and I sat together on the low seat by the window of my chamber. He had brought me stuff of Persia, soft like a cushion, yet strong, to lay upon it from end to end. All to pleasure me he did it, having taken the measure secretly, or else carried it in his head. For such at this time was his wont.

Almost, indeed, I had forgotten that he was my husband. It was so long since anyone had reminded me of it—least of all William Douglas himself. So now it was more as friends that we sat together, talking easily, or rather he talking and I listening. For, to speak truth, there was in my heart a great desire to hear him speak of James, his brother, whom I had not seen since my marriage day. Yet because I would not ask and he would not tell, I was silent while he recounted of all that Archibald was doing in the north, where he had been made Earl of Murray. Then he told of Hugh, who was now Earl of Ormond, and Little John, who must needs have a barony of his own and set up as "My Lord of Balveny!"

"And what," said I, to lead the converse, "have you

done for James? Is he alone to be left plain knight when the Lieutenant-General portions out all Scotland among his brothers?"

As I was speaking a strange look passed over my husband's face. He gazed out across the green garden, over the wall of the square *enceinte* of Thrieve to where, on the green grass, Maud's elder children were sporting, rolling, biting, and clawing at each other like young puppies.

"Ah," he said slowly, choosing his words, "there is an old title in Scotland that I have reserved for James, older than Murray, or Ormond, or Balveny. It is enough for my second brother that he is, and shall remain, the Master of Douglas!"

This, as I knew, was the title reserved for the heir of all. So, after this answer of William's concerning his brother, we sat a long while silent. I know not of what my husband thought, but for me I said nothing, because I had nothing to say that would comfort him. At last he spoke, looking at me gently enough.

"You weary here?" he asked. "Have you no desire sometimes to change Thrieve for Douglas Castle or Avondale? If so, I will give the orders!"

"Then I may not go again to Edinburgh or Stirling, where the Court is?" I asked, to try him. For, indeed, I knew the answer already.

"I judge it not safe," he said. "There be many about the King's court that would be glad to trap the Douglases, all at one bird-catching. Therefore, if I am here, James is at the Court, and Archie and Hugh busy in the North. As for you, little as you are, do not forget that you carry with you as your dower all Galloway and the Borders, together with such hard-won honours as can be wrenched from the thieves of Annandale and the lads of the forest."

He smiled faintly and almost wistfully, holding my hand the while; but, still, only as a brother might.

"Yes," I answered, "it is indeed no small thing to have laid upon another's back the burden of so much! But for me I am content with Deeside, and Maud and

Sholto—and the spectacle of another woman's love, all siccar and untroubled!"

"There is no such thing on earth!" said William Douglas, "as you will find, my sweet cousin, when——"

"Hark, listen!" I whispered, interrupting him; "it is the cooing of the turtle-doves!"

"What—what?" he answered quickly. "I will not listen! It is not fitting—to overhear the Captain of my Guard and his wife at their private conversations!"

And he moved precipitately to go out.

But I caught him by the arm and dragged him down.

"It had been for your good if you had heard more and listened more, my Lord of Douglas," I whispered to him, "aye, and stood thus behind window-bars with your finger on your lip. Good William—you know not everything! Listen, there are the makings of the prettiest quarrel down on the terrace yonder."

"A quarrel?" he said in wonder. If I had said a tournament, I do not think he would have been more astonished.

"Yes," said I, "a quarrel first, most petulant and provocative—afterwards—well, you shall see!"

"How do you know this?"

"Have I not watched little housewife Maud trimming her sails for a storm all day long—aye, ever since she rose and laced her stomacher?"

"St. Bride," quoth honest Will, "do women spend their time on such trifles?"

"Aye, and enjoy it too," I answered him. "It is their life to them, as bands and treaties and Lieutenant-Generalships are yours. And they have on the whole the greater certitude of happiness! But hush, here are our doves of Thrieve!"

"I cannot stay! I will not!" said William Douglas.

But I put my hand on his arm and held him forcibly, bearing all my weight upon it.

"Stay," I said, "yes, stay, William. You may learn more in half an hour than you have learned at the King's council-board all your life."

By this time the evening had fallen still, soft, and with

a wide peace through which the swallows seemed to swoop down from unseen heights, as from another world. You could hear the laughter of the men-at-arms sent on forage duty, paying court, after their kind, to the milk-maids, none too coy, across the water at the Mains of Thrieve.

Beneath us, and dark against the silver of the water, I could just see Maud. She leaned on the stone balluster, even as the A'Hannays had done. Sholto was further within, occupied with some matter of the adjustment of armour, concerning the exactitude of which (as became a good soldier) he was a mighty stickler. Maud looked two or three times over her shoulder; but Sholto, busied with some intricate fabrication of leathern belts and steel buckles, whistled on, paying no heed.

"Come here, Sholto," said Maud Lindsay quickly, "I want you!"

Sholto glanced up, with his usual swift, authoritative toss of the head, an action which showed the firm setting of the chin on the neck, and the squareness of the shoulders.

"In a moment, Maud," he said. "I am busy. What is it?"

"*I want you!*"

Sholto rose instantly, throwing down the soft leathern setting of the armour he was designing, and laying aside the pieces of shining steel he had been fitting upon it.

"What is it, Maud?" he said gently, as he approached.

"You would not come," she said. "You are not as you used to be. You think more of your armour and weapons than you do of me——".

"Dearest——!" cried Sholto, aghast at the very suddenness of the attack.

Maud turned upon him and held out her arms.

"*Do* you love me?" she cried—"really—truly—tell me!"

"Of course I love you!" said Sholto with the true baldness of a man long wedded, who has had time to use up his vocabulary.

"Say it otherwise, if you mean it, Sholto!" persisted Maud.

"*Je t'adore!*" said Sholto promptly. He had not been

in France for nothing. Maud looked at him smiling, and then suddenly burst into tears. Any excuse was better than none. Sholto gazed at her frankly bewildered, and then would have put his arms about her, but she repelled him indignantly.

"You make light of our love," she said. "You would not have done it when you first knew me. But now—I am old. I am the mother of children. And, what can a woman expect. Men change!"

"*Maud!*"

"Oh, 'tis easy to say 'Maud,' and take a poor foolish woman in your arms. But to love her and hold to it year after year—that is another matter!"

I could feel William Douglas growing restless as the twilight deepened and from beneath the voices came clearer. But I would not let him go.

"For my sake," I said to him.

"Oh, if Maud and Sholto would only behave themselves," I thought, "I would yet go to Edinburgh with my husband."

And for the rest of the time in the chamber I thought no more of any man—of James Douglas or another. The voices came again. It was Maud who spoke. Apparently somehow without words Sholto had made his peace, and perhaps he thought (poor man!) that Maud had altogether delivered herself.

"Sholto," she said, looking at him softly, "do you know that sometimes I dream of going far away with you —to another country? I know not where that land is. Only that there we will have no wars or rumours of war, no steel breastplates or sharp-piercing lances, no killings and treacheries. But just you and me for ever living on in a sweet peace, in a little house by ourselves, with the children growing up about us. And then there will be always a blue sky above, and close by a river running."

"That will do to drink, but what shall we eat?" said Sholto with practical tenderness. "Eh, tell me that, baby?"

At another time Maud (if such had been her mood)

would have resented his tone as trifling with all that was of highest and holiest. But as it happened, she only clasped him in her arms the more tightly.

"Oh, Sholto, I could live upon your love," she said; "you are better to me than meat or drink—more necessary than the air I breathe."

"Good," said Sholto, imperturbably. "I did not know I was so nourishing. But how about the children? Could they diet upon me too?"

We heard the clear ringing impact of fingers on cheek.

"That is for being insolent," said Maud, whose mood changed every moment. "You know what I mean?"

"Yes!" said Sholto, dutifully, but still somewhat doubtfully.

"Of course, it is all just a dream, a foolish dream," said Maud, looking out on the river, "a dream born of the sunset and the—the—having you here with me—all alone!"

"Margaret," whispered William Douglas, "this makes a shame of me. I will stay no longer."

"A shame," answered I, softly. "Are we not married —you and I—even as they? Hush, you cannot go now, they will hear you! Bide. This is only the beginning—she means to quarrel with him yet, or I am a Welshman. A quarrel and a reconciliation are what I call 'Maud's nightcap' when she hath been fretted."

"You do not mean to say?" began William Douglas.

I covered his mouth with my finger in the dark, and whispered in his ear, "Of course I do! What else is there to do in Castle Thrieve, think you, but quarrel with those we love?"

Then the voice of Maud, as I had supposed, took up her plaint.

"Sometimes," she said, "I wake in the night and think you are dead! Does not that show how I love you?"

As Sholto appeared to contemplate this subject without extreme enthusiasm, Maud proceeded.

"Then I have beautiful visions of flying with you through the air, on angels' wings, the two of us all clad in whiteness, and the children, too, clad like little angels

(which they are now, indeed, only not able to fly). Do you ever have a dream like that?"

Conscientiously Sholto turned over the treasures of his midnight memories.

"No," he answered simply. And then, perhaps feeling the word a little bald, he added, "But I have dreamed of riding on a horse——"

Maud pushed him from her with vigour.

"Always of horses and armour and fightings," she said. "You never think beautiful things as I do. Why, I sometimes dream that we shall die the self-same day. It will be in the morning—no, the evening. That would be sweeter for you and for me!"

"And as to the children?" said Sholto, quietly. "It would be a cheerful awakening for them, poor brats, next morning!"

"God would care for them!" said Maud with vague piety. She was certainly hard bested for a cause of quarrel.

"Well," said Sholto, "at least I think the babes would be none the worse off, for one or the other of us to be spared to them!"

Maud leaped upon the argument fiercely.

"Ah, there it is," she cried. "You want me to die before you. You would soon fill my place. I know that well!"

She pushed him back, and in the reflection of the sunset sky on the water, we could see her bend a little on her knees and look up into his face.

"Ah, I believe it——" she cried, beginning quite suddenly to sob uncontrollably. "You would—perhaps you know of someone already. You are only waiting for my death to—to bring her here!"

Maud flung one arm out. She had acted so well that (like a woman!) she was beginning to believe her own chance assertions. Her hand struck him on the breast.

"I will not stay," she cried hoarsely. "Let me go. I will take my children away. I will save them—from—from that woman!"

"Maud," gasped Sholto, "I tell you— I swear to you—

I beseech you. I never thought of such a thing! You yourself know I did not!"

"Do not deny it. Do not dare to defend yourself. Do not add lies to your wickednesses. I have seen it for long, long years. There—let me pass! I will go where the innocents sleep. If I am to die, at least let me die beside them."

"Maud—Maud!"

She made as if to go in, but he held her to him.

"No," said Sholto, "you mistake. All I said was that these poor five bairnies would be the better of either you or me to care for them!"

"Oh, yes," said Maud scornfully; "and it is evident that you must often have been thinking of this before, to have your answer so ready!"

"I swear to you, Maud," said Sholto, "never before to-night——"

Maud pointed slowly upwards to where a star was beginning to shine, sole and lonely amid the purpling deeps of heaven.

"Do not be profane," she said. "There is One yonder who hears!"

"I care not if the four corners of heaven heard," cried Sholto passionately. "I will swear——"

Maud laid her hands together with a sweet smile.

"Swear what?" she said, suddenly becoming gentle.

Sholto scratched his head in some perplexity.

"Upon my faith and word," he said; "I have not an idea what it is all about!"

Maud burst into a peal of merry laughter, and clasped her husband in her arms.

"You great gowk," she said. "Silly boy, will you never learn? I love you. Only I was fretted. I have been vexed and fretted all day, and you would not attend to me, but thought only of your stupid armouries. But I made you. Now let us make up. There, there! Will that do? Come, let us go in!"

. . . . .

William Douglas, constrained by my hand silently protesting rather than obedient, had sat till now. He rose,

"'CHILD, . . . YOU TORMENT ME PAST BEARING'"

and we went back into the little chamber of reception which adjoined my bed-chamber.

"Are all people who love each other incurably insane?" he asked with some heat. "Does love make of Maud Lindsay, that incomparable housewife and good mother, a puling, yammering fool? Of Sholto McKim, the best lance and stoutest heart in Scotland, a reed blown by the wind, a withe twined round a woman's fingers?"

"Even so," I answer, "but *you* will never know it!"

"For that, thank God," he said. "There are quarrellings enough, and argle-barglings to spare in broad Scotland without domesticating them at your own hearthstone, and having the house you live in turned into a bear-pit."

"William," I said, "there are some things hid from the wise and prudent and revealed unto babes. Maud and Sholto have never quarrelled once since they were married."

He snatched his hand from mine hastily—why, I know not.

"I am not a babe," he said, "but I can believe my ears! If words mean anything these two have been at open enmity for an hour by the clock. And you—*you*—their friend, have made an eavesdropper of William Douglas!"

At this I laughed, serenely content.

"My dear husband," I said, "shall we go down and ask them if they regret their quarrel? For me, I judge——"

"Well, what do you judge?"

"That it would be better and happier for you and me, if we quarrelled oftener after the manner of Sholto and Maud!"

This time I was not prepared for him.

"Child," he cried, gripping me by the arm so hard that he hurt it, "you torment me past bearing. Either you mean a thing or you do not. Which is it to be—all or nothing?"

I thought him noble. I had no other thought. I felt a strange numbness, at once lax and faint, steal over my limbs. My husband held me in his arms. There was a

fierce energy in his action. He hurt me, so strong he was.

Then from the chamber beneath there came, deep, throbbing, and somehow infinitely moving, the laugh of Maud Lindsay—suddenly cut in the midst as if a hand had been laid across her mouth.

The sound seemed to break the spell that was on him.

"No," he cried, loosing me abruptly—almost indeed thrusting me from him. "Shall William Douglas break his word, sworn and plighted? Shall James keep the oath which I have broken?"

And with no further word he turned and strode out of the chamber. I was left alone. There was silence underneath, save that a little while after a charger neighed, and, looking from my window, I saw William Douglas, my husband, halt his horse on a little knoll outside the walls, and stand a long while looking back—the beast, fresh from the stables, meantime tossing his head and chafing visibly at the restraint.

Then he rode out of sight and I was alone indeed—which was my loss.

CHAPTER XXI

DOUGLAS RIDES LATE

THE days went by at Thrieve—some few, like my Arab, galloping, most like a funeral train, as is the wont of days all over the world. Some the pigeons in the court would shorten, flying down in windy, whistling crowds to peck the grain, with which, in spite of Sholto's teeth, Magdalen and I persisted in feeding them. With Maud at our back we could do much.

Larry came from Sweetheart, but not for a long season, and, indeed, not till I had sent for him a full score of times. There was something most unmonkishly manful about Laurence, and now, when Will came no more to Thrieve, and I was shut off from James, my heart desired to see the lad. For, though I could not help caring for James when he was with me (being so great and strong, and, as it were, encompassing), and though I wished to be a good wife to my husband, yet, it is no shame to confess it, as a friend and comrade Laurence was more to my mind than either of them.

I am not even now sure that Laurence would have come to Thrieve even for a day, in spite of all our entreaties, had it not been that his father sent him ill news of Magdalen. It was not that the child was stricken by any disease, but she languished, and failed to win back the strength she had lost.

It was then, for the first time, that I saw her father appear perturbed; for the armourer was bound up in the maid, as, indeed, were all her brothers. But Laurence, I think, she loved best of all, and he her.

At all events, swift upon that summons Laurence came, first to the Three Thorns, and afterwards to Thrieve. I found him paler than of old, and more quiet, while his face lacked its bold, fresh boyishness. I could also clearly see that he was passing anxious about his sister.

"There is something I cannot understand!" he said, and then forthwith was silent.

"We cannot even get her to come to Thrieve, can we, Maud?" I said. "Perhaps she will accompany you."

But Magdalen, though she would visit us with Larry for a day, would not remain. She loved (she said) to take long solitary walks among the pine forests which lie betwixt the Mollance and Crossmichael. There was, as William Douglas had said truly, none to do her wrong. For not only did the fear of the Earl lie heavy upon the land, but still more immediately the fear of Brawny Kim, that strong smith of Carlinwark and his seven sons, who would follow an ill-doer to the gallows or the stake —as indeed they had done with the Marshal de Retz in the country of Brittany.

So Laurence came and went amongst us once more—sweet, loving, and gracious always. But somehow, it was not now as it had been in the days of Cour Cheverney. My wedding, which was no marriage, separated us. He had, as I guessed, some inkling of how James had come between William Douglas and his full heritage.

At all events there was no more making of boats to sail on the broad peat-brown Dee Water. No little mills were set birling in the burns of Glenlochar and Boreland. But it was "Yes, my lady Countess!" And "No, my Lady of Douglas," instead as of old, "My princess" and (at least once) "Margaret of Margarets!" But of all that, no trace.

Yet, knowing that Laurence was right, I liked the lad none the worse because of his carefulness for me.

Still there were good days at Thrieve—set in between, as it were—when we would wean Magdalen from her lonely haunts and Maud from her Martha-housewifery, and set off all together to cull the flower or pull the nut. Any excuse or none served us—so that we could win away for a long day on the hills of Balmaghie or in the woods of Kelton.

Yet I loved the hills best, and chiefly, I think, because I could stay a little apart from the others, and look away to the north where lay Edinburgh and Stirling. James

Douglas and William Douglas were there, and lo! I was shut off from them by the blue hills of Carsphairn and the dun muirs of the Windy Standard.

Now Magdalen had wandered so far and constantly that she knew every haunt of the sweet rough-rinded hazel-nuts, the dark purple blackberries (which in their season the birds ate so freely that every grey rock and boulder was spotted as though a whole army of scriveners had jerked their pens this way and that). She found also with ease the creeping cranberry, the whortleberry, and the rare, pale, deep-hidden strawberry.

Not only so, but when fruits were lacking, Magdalen could discern the Grass of Parnassus long ere the rest of us had sighted it. She knew where to find the St. John's Wort, the Great Bluebell and the Herb Paris. Yet there was nothing enthusiastic about her search. With all her wondrous beauty, Magdalen moved rather like one in a dream, going to the flower she sought directly, like a scent dog when the coneys crouch among the heather.

Then, when we came back tired from the hills, Magdalen would make straight for the Three Thorns, moving easily and swiftly over the knolls like a young deer, while, all gravely and sedately, Laurence would return by my side.

Thus went the months, Laurence going back all too soon to his abbacy, till it was another spring and another fruit-time—then another and yet another, so that it seemed as if nothing would ever change. The world must stay for ever thus. And then I could have cried out for the castle to crash in upon our heads, or Michael's trump to break up the grey firmament of clouds into the flaming fires which shall consume the world—anything, if only all things would not be so eternally the same.

And I think I prayed, though indeed at this time I confess I troubled the saints not much—the convent and the Bald Cat, together with Sister Eulalie, having put me out of kilter with a too frequent clicking of beads—which, indeed, I judged to be chiefly work for priests and suchlike, who had but little to do. And so thought Laurence also, at least for many years.

But as it happens mostly, in such cases, the days were

not far off when I was to long for one short day of the peace of Thrieve, the kine flicking their tails on the verges of the water-meadows, the swaying pull of the laden hazel branches as Laurence held them down on the Airieland braes—even the skirl of the whaup or the flap of the heron seeking their nests out on the moorland or down among the reed-beds of the Dee. Yes, I longed for them all—all that world of peace—and had it not.

But of that—anon.

. . . . . .

It was Malise who first put into my heart the fear which ever after sat heavily upon me.

"Little lady," the armourer of Thrieve began one day as he stood examining the bolts of the great door of Thrieve, "have you never given to your husband that advice of the wise king of auld time, the which Laurence read me out of his learned books in the Latin tongue—or the Greek, I mind not which."

"And what might that be, Malise?"

"To switch aff the heads o' the mucklest poppies!" he answered gravely, "an' that richt early. For if he winna, of a surety there shall fall a head so high that it touches the stars!"

"You mean my Lord the Earl William's," I answered; "fear not for him, Malise. He holds them all in the hollow of his hand!"

"That may be sae," persisted the smith, "I doot it not. But, mind ye, I have seen ere this a hundred yelpin' curs pu' doon a stag-o'-ten-tines!"

And the advice was good. For at this period William Douglas was like to none in all the land, and when he went forth the Crichtons were as nothing before him, hiding away in holes and corners. Even Livingston the Tutor had made friends with him, or at least seemed to do so. The worst of the ancient abuses were stubbed down, digged up, or rooted out of the land. And all was done without cruelty or the least hardship to any, save only to those who did evil to their neighbours or to the poor at their gates. On such William Douglas had no pity.

Yet for all, so simple was he, he never guessed that

when the King delivered to him all authority, and, pretending to make much of him, sent him off on great embassies to London, to Paris, to Rome itself, it was always that he himself might escape from control and return to his favourites as a dog to his vomit. But, in spite of King and favourites, William Douglas waxed ever greater and greater in the land—for a time.

Then came a cooling in the ardour of the King's goodwill. But of this, also, William took no heed, continuing to make treaties with England and France for the country's advantage in trade and well-being. Also he banded the more sober parts of the North into one league with himself, so that even the barbarous and pagan Isles (called of Skye and the Long Island) were made to obey and pay dues as regularly as the Lowdens and Fife. It was well said afterwards that the land made a greater advancement during these short years of William Douglas's vice-regality than it had done since the Battle of the Standard.

But much of this came to us in our island-prison only in over-words and snatches. Save that which concerned itself, little gossip reached Thrieve. Packman and carriers from Lanerick and Dumfries brought us most of our news. On important occasions a messenger for Sholto would come in with his beast all of a lather, or if it were night or winter, in a perfect breathing mist of steamy vapour.

One night in particular I remember. It was in the deep middle of winter—that is to say, in February. For mostly winter begins in Scotland with the inbringing of the Yule log. Sholto was at Douglas Castle on some business of the Earl's. Andro the Penman was in command at Thrieve, and, with his stick and hard words, scarce managed to secure that discipline which Sholto enforced with the mere glint of an eye or the indrawing of a resolute lip. But then Sholto was a knight and in full authority, and Andro the Penman only one of the Guard—as it were, first among his peers.

It was a night of snow. The afternoon had fallen upon the face of the country greenish-grey and dour, with a

bitter nip in the air. Andro the Penman sniffed and said, "Snow!" Maud, with her nose to the wind, looked out on the terrace towards the north, in turn shook her head and said "Snow! And I pray that that goodman of mine may be somewhere snug in hold to-night."

Then she went and saw to it that the bairns' window-shutters were properly fastened inside the shot bars which kept them from falling out ten times a day.

Then, softly at first, small dampish snow began to fall drizzlingly, drifting on the ledges, forming into little piles behind the gargoyles, and making long lines with waving crests in the roof gutters. The men on guard on the towers and about the fortifications had an ill time of it. The storm seemed to take them every way at once.

"God help all such as are abroad to-night!" I said, as I drew my furs close about me. For even in the great hall, with fires blazing at either end, piled high with beech-logs and crackling bog-oak, hissing birchen twigs, and steady burning peat, it was bitter cold.

And so that February afternoon the twilight darkened early into the solid blackness of Egypt. Wrapped in shawls, Maud and I sat about the fire, after we had supped, the candles feeble behind us, and the tapestries on the walls moving in long regular waves, that seemed to go from one end of the room to the other, giving boars and hunters and steeds a wonderful appearance of life.

It was creepy and eerie enough sitting there in the leaping firelight. And Maud did not help matters, with her Highland tales of second-sight and death warnings, added to my own reminiscences of the wicked Lord Soulis, with his familiar spirit, Red Cap. More than once we looked fearfully over our shoulders expecting to see that famous imp leaping out of the old charter-chest to ask for new labours and to remind his master of his promised wages.

Such tales, told in the flicker of the twilight, in a castle full of dark deeds and memories, might well try the strongest nerves, and it is small wonder that presently Maud murmured, "Oh, I wish that Sholto were here!"

But it was not Sholto who was to visit Thrieve that night. Red Cap had, indeed, been at his tricks, and, at any moment, we might expect his head out of the chest with a demand for his wages.

Long time we sat thus, Maud and I, listening to the varying roll of the tempest without, discerning at intervals a shriller note as the wind, halting as if to catch its breath upon the outer walls, leaped with a fierce hoot upon the huge square keep of Thrieve, whistled through its window bars, clanged every unpinned door, and almost tore from its staff the banner that flapped and lunged noisily above the highest battlements.

At intervals Maud would raise her head as if listening for Sholto's return. But it was really toward the children's chamber that her ear inclined. Then after three or four hearkenings, her anxiety would compel her to rise and steal up on tiptoe into that place of sweet children's breathings, with the shutters closed upon the windows and the peat fire smouldering red upon the hearth. From bed to bed she would steal, laying a kiss on that tress of flax and yonder dark head of crispy black, all the while with a mother's adoring look plain in her eyes.

At which point, if I accompanied her, I was wont to betake me down with a little jealous pain pinching shrewdly at my heart. But that night, whether from wistful feeling akin to the storm, or in sympathy with the poor houseless knaves and gangrel wenches abroad in the snow, I sat still where I was, wae and silent, by the fire in the great hall of Thrieve. The snow was not the ordinary snow of Galloway, broad, moist and flaked, but had changed into small, bitter, east-land snow, more like powdered ice. I could hear it patter against the closed windows, and fall with a hushing sound on the wooden roof of the balcony above.

Silently Syneton, the French boy William had brought with him to be groom to my Arab, would enter and heap fresh logs on the fire. As silently he would disappear. A Galloway lad of his years would have clanked in with a pair of wooden clogs all too scantily wiped on a wisp of straw brought from the barn. But Syneton went and

came like a shadow—clean, swift, and bidable—a treasure save in this, that the truth was not in him.

Above, Maud Lindsay tarried long, and I grew weary and a little afraid. I think Maud forgot herself when she gat among her babes. At least, she would promise solemnly to descend in one short quarter of an hour, and then look aggrieved and hurt when it was pointed out to her that her absence had extended over an hour and a half! Then it was that she would say, as if that explained all, "Ah, you are not a mother, Margaret!"

And I would reply, "Nor you, Mistress Maud, a maid that should be none!"

Which (though truth) did not greatly mend matters.

And indeed, to be just, Maud did not boast of her brave bairns, though I know her heart stirred within her with pride.

At any rate, I was long alone—left with my thoughts in the uncertain flicker of the firelight, while the wind down the wide chimney scattered the grey wood ashes abroad over the oaken floor, and over William's great rug of Turkey stuff.

Then through a pause of the storm, I heard a far-off sound, clear and piercing, but so distant that I started as if from a dream. It was like a trumpet blown in the lists before the bars are let down, and the champions bid "fall to." I smiled. Certainly I had been dreaming. So anew I began to watch the clear blue flames licking and hissing upwards about the new wood, the equal orange of the seasoned billets, and the rich red glow of the back log, half eaten into by the long afternoon's fire.

Again it seemed that I dreamed. But nearer, clearer, more insistent, the notes came to my ear, blown as Laurence used to blow them when he was ready to convey me across to the flower-gathering, in the boat which he had stolen from old grumble-pate A'Cormack, at the gate-house by the drawbridge.

Eagerly I lifted my head, and listened with long and strained attention. But I heard only the hurl of the tempest overhead among the high roof spaces of Thrieve,

the steady "brool" of the wind all about the four corners of grim, impassive masonry, the spirting sound of the snow—small, like hail—on the windows. I had been mistaken. None could possibly be abroad on such a night; at any rate so much the worse for them if they were! Thrieve was a shut gate, a fortress barred. None could enter there. Only Sholto had the word—Sholto and his master.

But yet a third time, and very near, I heard the trumpet blow—clarion clear, net as thunder-clap when thunder follows flash swifter than thought succeeds to thought. Something struck the window at that moment; it might have been only the icy fingers of the storm, save that it sounded more solid. It struck again, and yet again. I was affrighted, and I cried aloud for Maud; but she was above, effaced among the tangles of blonde and dark that were scattered on the nursery pillows.

The noise came again, with a crying that was like the soul of a man in pain.

But, mastering myself, I went to the window and flung it open. Something huge and black, which might have been a raven or a great bird of prey, fluttered away into the half-luminous mist of the courtyard.

I looked down in amazement. There were torches beneath, awakening voices, apparent through the enveloping snow. The window I had opened slammed to in one of the fierce gusts, and caught my hand in the sill.

I stood sucking at the hurt like a baby, half crying, and in the intervals of pain calling for Maud almost like one of her own bairns, when suddenly the door of the great hall was flung open, and the tapestry parted itself as with the wrench of a strong hand.

It was my husband who stood before me, with such an expression on his face as I had never seen there before. Mired and slimed he was with the bogs and morasses of his long travel, the snow lying white in the links of his armour and along the verges of his breast-plate. He held only a plain steel cap in his hand, without plume or ensign. For he had ridden light like a moss-trooper, with only a single attendant at his heels.

"Where is James Douglas, my brother?" he panted rather than spoke.

And the anger, cold and bitter, on his face almost deprived me of the power of reply.

"Come," he said roughly, "where have you hidden him? Tell me quickly!"

"James"—I stammered with that surprise which is so often mistaken for the signs of guilt, "James Douglas? I have not seen him since my wedding day!"

William stood staring at me for a long moment and then dropping his head between his wet hands, he cried, "Great God, have I wronged him?"

There came a new voice from the doorway.

"As to that I know nothing, and as little care, my lord of Douglas!" cried Maud Lindsay. "But this I do know, right bitterly and right grievously have you wronged your wife."

CHAPTER XXII

THE DOUGLAS BIDS GOOD-BYE

I LOOKED up and saw Maud stand in the doorway, left open by the tumultuous entrance of my husband. She held back the tapestry with her hand. No Numidian lioness at the entrance of her den, her cublings mouthing behind her, could have appeared more fierce. To look at Maud's mouth, upon ordinary occasions, you would never believe she could have snarled. But she did. I saw her. She stood for a moment without speech while my husband hid his face between his hands. Yet she did not relax or relent. I could not have believed my Maud so impitiable. But I knew afterwards that she was mindful of the time when I had been to her as a babe between her hands, and she was heartsore to see me fallen (as she said) between the stools of men's love and their lust for power. A motherly woman can never understand (or forgive) that last, save in her own sons. Then it becomes a "proper ambition." Besides, another woman has to bear the brunt of it—not she.

Thus it was that in spite of her husband, Maud never truly appreciated William Douglas. But then too that was natural enough—her test of all men, gentle and simple, being merely, "Would Sholto have done this? Would Sholto have said that?"

As for me I said nothing. Truly I did not understand this sudden irruption, or why William Douglas had thus burst in upon our quiet.

But Maud needed no instruction, she was ripe enough and ready enough with her interpretations, and they erred not on the side of charity. Of that, small danger where William was concerned.

"There," she said, waving her hand abroad, with some-

thing of her old mocking vixenry, "go—search the castle. It is yours—by marriage. You will not even find my husband here. He is doing your errands at Douglas Castle. So neither one of us has ever a man to defend our repute, or speak a word in our favour. Go search Thrieve from dungeon to battlements if you will! Question the scullions! Send for the pantlers! Mayhap we have your brother hid in the cellarage——"

"Maud," I said, "be silent, I bid you. You forget to whom you speak!"

But William Douglas waved me with his hand to let her go on.

"She is right. I deserve this and more," he said, in a broken voice. (That ever I should have lived to hear the like from so noble a man!) "But James left me at Edinburgh, riding southward, knowing that I was summoned in haste to meet the King at Stirling. So, the fit being on me, I let the King wait, and followed James. Yes, I followed till I lost him upon the Flowe of Lochenkit. It was just when this accursed storm broke. I saw him before me not half a mile, my brother James or his ghost. Where is he if not here?"

Maud Lindsay came over to me and laid her hand gently on my arm. "Go up to your chamber, bairnie," she said; "when right is, and I have spoken my mind, I will come to thee."

Then to William she said, "This child knows nothing of evil things—scarcely of evil thoughts. Speak the things you have to say to me, and I will tell her that which must be told. Remember, she is a maid, walking in the midst of marvels not half understood. Go, Margaret! I will follow!"

And for a moment I think she thought of me as no more than her own Marcelle—grown a little older, but no whit the wiser, or the twins, Cuthbert and Bride (anything but saints!) or sturdy Ulric, or even little piping David with the castle Bubbly Jock goldering at his tail. At any rate, one she loved was being harassed and so Maud ruffled her feathers, drooped her wings and made ready beak and claw. So that woe betide the intruder, be he

Earl of Douglas—or as aforesaid merely the turkey cock from the stables.

What passed at that interview I do not know—that is, not such a version as can be set down in this place. For women talk differently to each other when men are out of hearing, and I suppose it is the same with writing.

But at all events it ended in this, that William would stay at Thrieve only so long as behoved him to change his wet undergarments, and take such refreshment as could be got ready by young cook A'Cormack, the son of our ancient porter of the gatehouse.

"Then," said Maud, "Earl William will ride on to the Three Thorns, where he has somewhat to say to my father. One or two of the McKim lads will guide him to Sweetheart Abbey. There he will rest what time he may before rendering himself to the King at Stirling. But, before departing, he asks that he may have the honour of bidding you good-bye! You will find him humble and of a good spirit. Certes I have laboured your ground right faithfully for you. Go now and sow well therein!"

"I think you were overly hard upon him, Maud," I said. For, indeed, so it had seemed to me.

Maud pouted her lips a little and set her hands on her thighs with a defiant action she had.

"Is there aught the matter with Sholto?" she said.

"No," I answered, "but why do you ask that?"

"What I have said to-night to William Douglas is very milk diet to what I have reared Sholto upon!" she answered. "But if you think barley water is better, try it!" The which was very well, but then Maud was like no one else in the world. Though but the wife of the captain of Thrieve, she moved as a queen among those about her, and the power was given her to sway men and women alike.

So upon this occasion it turned out even as Maud had predicted. William Douglas met me with a chastened humility which set my heart beating with pity for him. I hated to see him brought so low by any woman, even in my own cause.

"Must you go to-night?" I said. "You know the Earl's room is always ready at Thrieve. 'Tis but seldom the sheets have been fresh-laid during these years. Stay to-night! I will serve you with mine own hands!"

But some hidden reason—the instancy of his business, his need to see the King, or that which he had to say to Sholto's father at the Three Thorns or his brother at Sweetheart, held him firm to his purpose!

"I have asked to bid you farewell, Margaret," he said, "because I may not have the chance of seeing you again or of saying that which must be said between us before I go hence!"

"Hush, William," I answered a little tremulously, "there is a God behind these things. This is not the end between us! You have gone away before, and after this time you will return again!"

"No," he said, with a kind of smile, curiously memorable and wistful to me, making the heart wae, "not the end. For I leave you as a legacy—the best of my heritage, intact and intangible, to my brother—my brother whom you love!"

He dropped his voice at the last words, not with anger or any appeal for pity, but only with a certain grave wistfulness, like one who, having a great cellar of rare vintages, may not drink of them, being vowed a Nazarene.

"What is this you say, William?" I said, "that you will not come back? You are surely not afraid—you the greatest man in the kingdom—you the Earl of Douglas—you my husband——?"

"Ah!" he said, almost as if he had groaned, "yes—I am your husband—and it is on that account that I am afraid."

I only looked softly and inquiringly at him, to give him time. For, indeed, after the gloaming on which we sat listening to Sholto and Maud, there was no self-reproach in my mind with regard to William Douglas.

"Yes," he repeated after me, "I am the greatest man in the kingdom. That is true. But there are many who strive for the second place. The King loves me not. I

scorn him. He is but a headstrong boy with the strength of arm wherewith his great-greatest-grandsire killed Comyn. Yet, to be a Bruce, he lacks the head that knew how to win Bannockburn. Notwithstanding, he has resolved to make garden-mould of the Douglases, whereon to grow the maggots of his poor unripe brain!"

"But, yet, has he not made you the Governor of Edinburgh and Lieutenant-General of Scotland?"

"Assuredly," he smiled; "but his favour is more unstable than the swing of the sea among tide-covered rocks—rising and falling, but always deadly."

"Then why go to Stirling at all?" I asked.

Will drew a paper from his bosom.

"There," he said, "is a safe conduct, under the King's own hand and seal, with the names of all his new councillors attached as witnesses. Will you have it to curl your love-locks withal? Or, perchance, to light the kitchen fire of Thrieve? It is worth no more; no, nor the word of any Stewart! Yet go I must and will, if all that I have done is not to be undone—all the Good to fall back to the Ill, all the ancient ramping misery set its foot again on the poor folk of Scotland—those honest burghers, those hinds of the broad ploughland, those herds of the hills, whose burdens I have lightened. They look to me as their helper, their deliverer. I cannot leave them to perish."

"*And for me?*" I murmured, questioning him with mine eyes.

Here William Douglas bent gently over toward me, lifted my hand and touched it with his lips, yet all reverently, as one who in church takes holy bread.

"Yes, Margaret, you——," he said; "have I not thought of you? Ever since *that day* my thoughts of you have been many and sore. I have come to Thrieve but seldom. For in our hearts the tides of life somehow run crossways, as in that Strait of Ireland that looks towards St. Patrick's Port!

"Yet, all the same, according to my possible, I have loved you, Margaret—yes, and held you sacred. If it be so that I go to my death—being bound by my duty

and the name we both bear—think not too unkindly of me. And, it may be, sometime when you are happiest, stand a moment by his grave and muse of William Douglas. He has not done so ill by you."

"Dear Will—dear cousin," I cried, "of course I cannot choose but keep you in my heart. You are the best man in the world. There is no one like you!"

He smiled sadly, and made a little motion with his hands in the French manner as if that mattered little. For which indeed he had some excuse.

"No," he said, "James was right—I wrong. I have not taken the way to get the pleasure of a man. The love of woman is not for me. I might grow old without ever having known it. But I thank God I shall never grow old. I leave to James to enter into that which I have kept for him, and to rejoice in possessing what has never been mine!"

"See, Will," I said gently, "you are sick and need rest. Speak no hard things to-night. Think none either of me or of yourself, and by the morning the dark spectres of your fears shall have vanished. What is it that Sir Harry says at mass?

"'*Sorrow endureth for a night, but joy cometh in the morning!*'"

"That may be so for you, little one," he said softly. "God send it! But for the men of the Douglases, they are doomed—even as the Stewarts are doomed, but we of the Southern House to better deaths in nobler causes!"

"Do not care for that—rest to-night, dear Will!" I pled with him. Because I had no anger against him on account of his errand, at that time knowing nothing of jealousies or unbeliefs. And besides (in his long absence) I had grown to think seldomer of James.

But William shook his head, smiling, however, to soften his denial.

"I must bear it through alone, little woman," he said, as if to a child. "You are good to forgive—not to be angry with me," he continued, softly. "What shall it be thought of the man who had an orchard enclosed and

hath not eaten of the fruit of it—a garden of pleasant fruits and hath not walked therein? And now—it is too late—it is too late!"

He walked to the door and holding it open, shouted, "Without there!" and Andro the Penman appeared, prompt at his master's call.

"Saddle me the grey," he said, sharply, "the Spanish stallion which the Agnew sent me from Lochnaw!"

"My Lord, the snow is deepening!" said Andro, pleadingly. Will Douglas made the stern little movement with his hand which, with him, signified the finality of his will. Andro bent his head and was going out. He turned, however, at the door.

"At least let me go with you," he pleaded; "it is a terrible night. I know the ways. There may be unseen foes!"

"The more reason," answered Will Douglas, "why you should stay and keep the castle where—my—wife—abides alone."

The Penman went out without another word.

Then William turned to me. For the first time the eyes of the man looked into my soul. Dimly I began to see what I had lost, yet even then my soul within me would not take blame to itself. He had kept his heart from me in a locked coffer. What if, of a truth, it stood open now? But in another moment I knew that, as he had said, it was indeed too late.

I did not any more try to detain him. Yet, for all that, he did not go. He stood, shifting uncertainly from one foot to another, awkward as a village lover at a country dance—he, the master of a kingdom, the Earl of Douglas, the Lord of Galloway—my husband!

Yet even for that my heart leaped within me. For there came over me that mysterious sixth sense that is given to all women, who, from princesses to kitchen-wenches, know when it is the heart of a man to kiss them. And this man so desired. Only—believe it who can—he knew not how to begin.

So since I possessed neither his awkwardness nor—his simplicity, presently taking pity upon the man, I

kissed him of mine own accord. Lightly it was and somewhat laughingly.

That little act seemed to overturn all his calm—to send a turmoil through the strong man's soul.

"Margaret!" he whispered hoarsely, and then again, "Margaret!"

Whereat with a sudden anger, half at himself and half perhaps at Fate, he gripped me fiercely in his arms, holding me hard and tight, kissing me the while on hair and brow, on eyes and cheeks. Last of all he kissed me on the lips—once, twice, thrice—and was gone, without word, leaving me alone and dizzy, maintaining myself, one hand on the table of the great hall, as I listened swayingly to the clatter of his way-going.

But I heard nothing. The snow had deadened the hoof-irons of the horse, and only the blast battered and raved more and more wildly about the towers of Thrieve —now for me grown more desolate than ever.

CHAPTER XXIII

THE FIRST STROKE OF DOOM

THEY brought me word. It was Laurence who came. James had sent him—not, I think, knowing—or perhaps in his insolence of security, not caring. And what it was, I must strive to tell dryly and plainly, if at all.

My husband, William Douglas, had ridden forth that night by the Three Thorns to have speech with Malise, and to ask that some of the lads should accompany him to Sweetheart.

But the ancient armourer of the Douglas House, having had his own way ever since he came into the world (or having taken it) bade saddle his own beast, saying that he alone could and would guide his lord to the Abbey of Sweetheart. So to Dulce Cor they had gone both of them together, through the deadliest hurl of the storm, taking the coast road, which, though more difficult, was less likely to be blocked, because in these parts the wind blows the snow behind the boulders and out into the sea. Strange, but so it is, in our Galloway.

Thence after some secret speech with Laurence, and a rest of several hours, Will Douglas had ridden away northward to meet the King at Stirling, Malise accompanying him as far as Clyde Water, having refused to be sooner parted from his master.

And after ten days in which I heard nothing, this was the tale which Laurence had come to tell.

"I speak in the proper name of the Lord James," he said. "For, being little better than a monk, I am counted a safe go-between in these matters."

Then, dryly enough, as is common at such times, he told his tale.

"The Earl William rode to Stirling under the King's safe conduct," so he began. "He was received with joy

and feasting. After dinner, in a little private chamber apart it chanced that there was no one with the Lord William save the King, when suddenly James Stewart drew a dagger, and having still one hand round William Douglas's shoulder in loving fashion, struck—struck his friend to the heart, calling on his hired butchers to assist. Among them they killed him, striking long after he was dead. Sixty-seven wounds there were on the body of our dear master and lord!"

Then there seemed to rise up before me the image, erect and noble, of the husband whom I had lost. The man who was to claim me, the first being dead, had been long away. I felt his power only in presence.

But Will was dead—my dear cousin Will. I thought of him as no other. Never would life be the same. Yet somehow I was noways surprised. It seemed now as if he had been doomed from the first. Even at Cour Cheverney and Amboise I had seen the line of death trench his brow. He had said it of himself. He was not made for life and love and pleasure—it bode that he should die young.

But to die by the hand of his King, his friend. It seemed a thing marvellous, save that I knew all the Bruces to be murderers, and all the Stewarts traitors to their own best friends. It was some time before strength was given me to ask how it happened.

"Little is known," said Laurence, "and that only from the report of the royal spick-and-span favourites and bully butchermen of the palace. But as the story goes, the King asked the Earl William (being alone with him after dinner) to break his treaty with my Lord of Ross. Then when he would not, showing cause, he struck at him suddenly with his dagger. This much only is vouched for. But those who speak are all the very hangman's company and there is no truth in them. Black and ever blacker are the lies they tell!"

"And is our lord the Earl—my cousin William—surely dead?"

"Aye, truly," Laurence answered softly. "The Lord James sent me to tell you!"

"Had he no message?"

"None save that after vengeance taken, he would come himself to you!"

. . . . .

"And now," continued Laurence, "since my errand is done, permit me to take my leave. It is not yet the time appointed. But one day there may befall the need of a refuge for you. And then—why, the door of Sweetheart will open, and the women of God, with their sweet pale faces, be ready to welcome you in!"

"And you, Laurence?"

"I shall not see you," he said, almost in a whisper, "but I shall know you are there. And that will be more to me than the New Jerusalem and all the stones of its twelve foundations!"

Then, indeed, there were threads to draw together. Sholto came back to put the castle in its final state of defence in case of need, and to raise the folk of Galloway —also, doubtless, to be near Maud and the babes. Nor did I blame him for that.

As to what James and the Douglas brothers did in and about Stirling, that needs a page to itself. And through all Scotland ever as the bruit spread, so did also the horror! The murder of a friend by a friend—both young men—the royal safe conduct stained with innocent blood—the unarmed guest slain by the hand of his host and despatched by his myrmidons—never was such a thing heard tell of in Scotland, or indeed scarce in the world.

And as for the things which in these latter days the King's chronicle-makers assert against our Lord William —as anent the death of the Tutor of Bombie and the rest,—I can refute all these in a word. They are but Highland lies, sired by the Stewarts and damed by their lick-spittle clerks—nothing more.

The Tutor of Bombie (hear the truth!) would have taken that poor heritage and crumbling fortalice on the sea-edge from his brother's son, its rightful heir, a lad of ten. William Douglas, being the feudal lord of both, saw that right was done and wrong put under. That is

the fact, which is known to all south of St. Mary's Loch, whose mind upon the matter was that a month in the cell of Archibald the Grim, and afterwards a stall in the abbey of Dulce Cor, were all too good for a despoiler of the widow and the orphan, like the well-served Tutor of Bombie.

And as to the gallows knob of Thrieve never wanting its tassel for fifty years, did ever mortal hear or speak such arrant lies?

Were not the Douglases noble gentlemen, dukes of the realm of France, as well as the greatest lords in Scotland? Had they not been ambassadors to Paris, to London, to Rome? Would they, then, think you, have come home to set so much carrion swinging under their own nostrils and those of their ladies in their mansion of Thrieve?

Assuredly no! The Douglas did justice; yea, and verily. But it was at the gallows' slot of the Furbar that the scaffold was set up and the pit digged. Not within sight or sound of Thrieve, where Will Douglas conserved me like a rare Provençal rose. Only madmen and the King's witlings could conceive and pen such manifest lies. But the time came, and that soon, when to speak evil (or to invent it for others to speak) concerning a Douglas of the Black was the surest passport to the King's favour.

But these things assuredly did William Douglas neither ill nor good, though in after time they have caused many, perhaps unwittingly, both to speak and to write the thing that was not. In the beginning, however, the story was set a-going by evil-contriving men, anxious to buy that unstable and unsatisfying mess of pottage, a King's good will, with falsehoods and jealousies.

But of this, no more! All the world, which knew him, knows the man William Douglas was—the one lion among a pack of mangy and verminous curs.

And in the things which befell at this time also, James Douglas bore himself stoutly and like the head of his family—though perhaps with some little of the levity which continually showed itself on grave occasions.

Instead of gathering the forces of the Douglas, as

Sholto had done on a former day of trouble, and marching directly upon the traitor-King and his councillors, he must needs, with his younger brothers, spend time in taking the town of Stirling by escalade—whence, however, the King of the Bloody Hand had fled to shelter himself more safely in the castle of Edinburgh. Once established in Stirling James Douglas extricated the hangman's garron, the worst and most unseemly piece of living horse-flesh in the town-royal out of its tumble-down hovel, and tying the King's safe-conduct to its tail, dragged the seals and the royal signature of the Stewart through the mud of the streets, to be trodden on and bemired of men and beasts.

And ever as they marched, James called aloud, "Burgesses and lieges of Stirling, behold the sworn promise of your King! Who will come forth and defend it? It is the word of a liar—the word of a traitor, the word of a murderer! I, James Douglas, proclaim it so, and give the lie and defiance to every man among you!"

But instead the wise burghers either stayed indoors, seeing as many fierce and well-armed Douglases in and about their town as there were stones in the causeway. Or some (the wilder rabble of them) came forth, hooting and voiding of *gardyloo* vessels upon the promise of their forsworn King, written, signed and sealed by his own hand. Such shame was never seen in a royal city!

Yet nevertheless it came to pass that the weeks went by, and, though there was great indignation and many thousands of true Douglases asked no better than to be led to battle against the traitorous Stewart and his low-born crew of Crichtons and Livingstons, there was none to be a head to them. The lads Archibald and Hugh and the Little John were sent to their Earldoms and dependencies in the north, thus dividing the name and clan, at a time when every Douglas should have been clambering up the feeble defences of Edinburgh town, and breaking down that castle wa', wherein so mickle ill had been contrived and wrought upon the Douglases of the Black.

William, had he been alive, would have had the top-

most tower of the foul nest about their ears in a week. Indeed, not so long before, he had taken the castle with the Crichton in it. But James, though as to his courage personal no man could doubt (for, indeed, he was ever ready and eager to prove it at all times upon any that would cross weapons with him), had yet a calculating and selfish province within his heart, though well hidden and undreamed of even by me at that time.

Nay, so much so that, mewed up in Thrieve, I longed for him to come and give me liberty. I had been a cage-bird so long—yes, let the cage be as sweetly gilded as Thrieve, and though I had with me Maud and the children, yet being born to sway the hearts of men, I longed to take again my power to me. I had proven my weapons at Cour Cheverney. I had walked unashamed at Amboise, by the side of the Dame de Beauté herself. Yet here, at Thrieve, somehow, with Maud and Sholto, and with the sight of their happiness ever before my eyes, there grew up within me a need. At first it was no more than an ache, vague, dull, and seldom-coming. Then as time went on, it grew more frequent and more acute. There was sometime in my heart of hearts an anger and almost malice against these wedded lovers. I grew to hate the little bairns that played upon the green (so wicked I was!)—because they were not mine. For though I pulled flowers and wove rush-baskets for them all day long, they would run like hares at the first clatter of their father's armour, or the faintest flutter of Maud's sun-bonnet coming towards us through the trees of the wood.

I wanted—well, something I wanted. I knew not what. Perhaps to be all that to someone—to have no rival near my throne, not even a young child. To know the love of men as it is when man loves once and for all—to hear (after a time) the sweet noise of children's voices far-off, cool and pleasant in the summer silences as the sound of waters falling, to hear and to know them mine also—not Maud's or Sholto's, but mine. God has put these desires deep in the heart of a woman, and in comparison with such things, princessdoms and dignities and

successes and triumphings and the queening of it as Damosels of Beauty and Chiefest among the Fair—all are as nothing. That is, for a woman who is a woman. She may learn it late, or she may learn it never. But if, unhappily, the last—then there is an ache and a pain. Something unassuaged, abiding hungry and unsatisfied in her heart, which she will carry to her grave.

Was that to be my fate? I feared it. I believed it. William Douglas was dead. Sincerely I mourned him. A friend of the graver sort he had been to me—a councillor, faithful, just, fearless, truth-speaking even at the cost of pain, my cousin, a staff of staunchness upon my way of life—as all these I mourned him, but not as my husband. A husband—I never had a husband. I never would have one.

The ache redoubled, grew more eager, mordant, angry against all the world. I was scarce to be spoken to. And Maud, dear, sweet soul, left me to myself, dreaming that it was because of the death of my husband and perchance some remorse that I had loved him so little. The truth was, I was wearied out. I could not be sorry any more. I longed for change—anything to take me out of myself.

It was his hour, and prompt at the hour which was his, James Douglas rode in through the gate of Thrieve.

CHAPTER XXIV

HIS HOUR

A GIRL confined for years in a great house, eager of heart, rebellious against binding and prisoning Fate, seeing all about her the sort of happiness her heart craved—Sholto and his wife with their hourly looks, facile to be interpreted, their faith in each other, their love and content, together with the wealth of children who should one day speak with the enemy in the gate! And then on the other side Margaret Douglas, the lady of all—widow and no wife, a maid with a woman's name—none save Maud to direct her, and she oftentimes too proud and too jealous of her happiness to be directed—surely James Douglas came in the dead ripeness of the time.

William would have ridden alone, coming in unexpectedly with white froth on his bridle reins at the close of a long day. But James, according to his nature, must needs gather his knights, lie all night at Kenmore-on-Deuch, and make a short journey to Thrieve that he might enter it for the first time as Earl of Douglas with curvetting chargers and the gay flap of pennons.

He took me in that first moment (strange as death's first certainty it seems now!). I rejoiced, as one might say, helplessly that there had come this new thing into my life, this hope which made to thrill and palpitate all my heart within me. No longer was I to be a state prisoner, with the Isle of Thrieve for my prison, shut in by the drumly Dee and hidden by the green far-off Cairnsmore and the purple hills of Balmaghie—the Dornal, Lochenbreck, Barstobrick, and the rest. Pah, how I had grown to hate them!

So I ran down to meet him, forgetting (alas, that it should be so!) even my mourning for the man who was dead. James had just leaped down from his beast, turn-

ing the next moment to cry a jolly word of cheer to his men to fill themselves with good Mistress Sholto's best cakes and ales. Then quite suddenly he caught sight of me.

I was standing, somewhat affrayed, on the upper steps of the great entrance. I think too I shrank a little back into the gloom of the arch—for I had been so long alone and felt it strange to be in presence of so many men.

I shall never forget what James Douglas did, thus seeing me stand uncertain. He dropped bridle rein on the instant—cast his loosened helmet on the ground to be picked up by any that wished—and with one bound had me in his arms. He held me as if I had been the little girl he had gone to the Pays du Retz to save, lifting me clear off the ground, light as a feather, and before them all kissing me cheek and chin. No wonder he fairly dazed my heart within me.

Yet when he had set me down, I drew away from him, saying in reproach, "James, that is but ill done of you—*so soon!*"

But James Douglas would none of my niceties as to times and seasons.

"God!" he cried, "do you think I have waited ten years for only that?—Another!"

And this time he kissed me almost fiercely and with greed. This was indeed a man of another sort from William, my cousin. But then—women are very ready to forgive this manner of love-making. Or, at least I was, and so without a word passed or an apology to his men we went in together.

I thought to find Maud above, but on some pretext of housewifery, and the coming of so many men to Thrieve, she had made shift to absent herself. The great hall was empty, and as soon as the arras fell over the door, and we were alone, James caught me to him again.

"*At last!*" he cried with a kind of sob. And I submitted to his embrace with the same dizzy yet triumphant happiness as in the Lady's Bower. I do not remember that I thought at all of William or of Laurence, or indeed of aught, save that I wished James Douglas to go

on holding me in his arms. They were so strong and firm. Also, I did not wish to be left alone any more.

Thus it was that James Douglas came home for the first time as Earl of Douglas to his own Castle of Thrieve. Or rather to *my* castle, for, with William's death, the princessdom of Galloway had returned to me, with all its dangers and all its powers.

Then again I was to experience the difference between my cousins. In such a case Will would have wearied me with talk of duties and responsibilities, "dieving" me concerning the great part I was called on to play in the world.

But James said only, over and over again, "I love you, Margaret. I have loved you all my life, and—sore against my will—I have waited these years for you. I will wait no longer."

"But how can we be married?" I asked, holding him, as it were, for form's sake, sometime at arm's length. It was only for a moment, and so did not alter things greatly. "We are cousins, and besides, I have been your brother's wife. It is forbidden by the church!"

He laughed one of his own laughs, great and boisterous. Then (a trick of his) he lifted me up by the elbows, easily as a child's puppet, bending to kiss me at the same time.

"You have been my Lady of Douglas, have you?" he cried. "Well, if you think so, I will show you other of it, little one, and that quickly. We shall be married, never fear—good and sound—aye, and have benefit of clergy, too, archbishops, and suchlike cattle. Why, there has gone already to Rome a messenger to crave a second dispensation from his Popeship, and the King himself hath signed the request, praying that you and I should graciously be permitted to wed!"

"But," I cried, thrusting James away, "is he not a murderer, this king, the slayer of your brother? Will you have aught to say to him, save at the spear's point, surely never?"

And James Douglas laughed again, so that the fine glass on the corner *armoire* rattled.

"Ah, little Margaret," he said, "for your sake I will e'en use James Stewart whilst I have need of him, and no longer. He is, at any rate, nothing more than a puppet that is worked with strings, and if he will help me to wed with you, shall I not pull the cord? Aye, till it breaks!"

Then I went on to speak sharply to him, still in remonstrance. "Your brother is dead," so I told him, "slain by the hand of the Stewart. I am but a girl, but I am a right Douglas. And rather than ask the hand and seal of one so murderous and man-sworn, I would——!"

"What would you do, little spitfire?" he said, holding me and smiling in plain masculine admiration, very disconcerting.

"I would be drowned in the castle moat!" I cried fiercely. "And hear you this, James of Douglas, I think but little of the man who takes his brother's death so little to heart, and who, instead of rousing the Marches and putting the traitor's head on the traitors' chopping-block, comes hither—to——!"

"Well, little Margaret," he said, "what is it I come to Thrieve to do?"

"*To make love to your brother's widow, instead of avenging his death!*" I meant the words to be bitterly winged, but there was something about James Douglas that took the bite out of the bitterest saying—a certain bluff, careless heartiness, which, I fear it, often veiled a very real heartlessness.

"Nay," he answered me, not in the least put out, "it was so convened betwixt us, Will and me, that day down in the meadow yonder. And I have held to it, and, God knows, never seen you since——!"

"And William?" I said, "is it that you think he has suffered nothing?"

James waved his hand, carelessly as ever.

"Contrariwise, much and nobly," he said, more soberly. "Fear not, I will avenge him. Or I and all my house shall die the death! But first of all I am bound to you. To Will my brother, the House was all—you nothing. Ye have to deal with another man this day,

Maid Margaret. You are first with me, who love you and shall wed you. Then by our twain loves made one, we will send the Douglas name across the world. These things are my whole soul and body. Plots, plans, dominations, pacts, my Lord of this, and his Majesty of that, bulk no more than my little finger when laid in the balance against the dearest woman in the world and the sweetness of her love."

This was good talk for a girl to hear who had been so long alone, and so greatly athirst for love.

And indeed, I deny it not—I asked no better than to believe him!

So for certain enchanted weeks, as it might be written, James Douglas abode at Thrieve, expecting with impatience the return of the ambassador from Rome. So that to me, more and more every morning, the life of William Douglas seemed as something which had never been—the ruffle of summer airs which grip for a moment the blue waters of Dee when the wind blows blithely from the north, as the flecked cloudlets of sunrise that melt into the wide blue of the highest heavens and are seen no more.

CHAPTER XXV

JAMES DOUGLAS, BENEDICT

AND truly the matter came about even as James Douglas had said. The Pope granted the dispensation for us to be married, backed as the request was by the name of the King of Scots. It was nothing to James that the hand which signed had been dipped in the blood of my first husband. As to the Pope in Holy Rome, it came before him with fifty others, doubtless, and was swiftly dismissed.

So we were married, James and I. And for a long month the hills of Balmaghie took on for me a more purple tinge, while above them the sun set in a paradise of gold.

I envied Maud and Sholto no more. Indeed, with a selfishness I marvelled at afterwards, I saw them but little, and the children not at all. For upon James Douglas's arrival they had been sent to their grandfather's cottage above the blue island-studded floor of Carlinwark, in which on clear still days the Three Thorns were mirrored.

For somehow, if Maud had been unfair to William Douglas, she grew tenfold more so to James. And that was a thing unusual in women—who, even when injured by him, were quick to forgive a man so heartsome and of a nature so large and bounteous. Perhaps—it comes to me now as a thing possible—she was jealous, having had my love so long to herself.

Yet, looking back after many years, I cannot deny that in these days James Douglas made me happy. It was not to be for long. It was not perhaps the highest happiness. But—at least it was the happiness I had ached for.

Nevertheless there was trouble in the air, brooding all

about us. Thunder muttered far behind the hills. Sheet lightning pulsed along the horizon as silently as a thought crossing the mind of God, and at night the aurora, with fingers green and red, weirdly grappled the zenith.

Meantime, we loved each other—James and I—or rather not so. For as for me I was in love with Love himself, a lusty young god I had sighed for long. And James Douglas—he, I judge, loved me as well as I deserved. But, as throughout all his life, he kept most of his affection for his own great, handsome, seldom-serious, often boisterous self.

Usually there is something of wistful sadness in the disenchantment which comes to a dreamy and sensitive woman, her girlhood nourished on romance and childish dreams, when marriage rudely tears aside the veil, and instead of Cupid is revealed that godship aforetime discreetly draped in the gardens of the ancients.

But so it was not with me. I had that which I desired. If it were true (as men said and women were not slow to whisper) that James Douglas could not long be true to any woman, the sense being a-wanting in him—at least he right royally entreated them and betrayed them most delicately. No girl could wish a better lover—no woman a more considerate husband. And at that time I thought of nothing save that he had given me back life after long years of death—life and love and observance. Nothing seemed a-wanting in the man I had chosen.

Nor did we stay long at Thrieve—at least not at a time. As my mood now was, I sighed for change. So with a retinue almost more than kingly we two rode forth—northward up the long valley past Grenoch and Ken Water to Casphairn and Douglas. But Douglas Castle, so I thought, could never be to me what Thrieve had been. Yet I loved that ancient tower also, as the Mother-hold and bees' byke whence the Douglases had buzzed forth over the land—to the north, the east and the west, but mainly be it said, towards the south and my own Galloway to which I kissed my hand every morning and evening—aye, though my heart had been wae enough to bide there by myself.

Yet now when I come to think it over I judge that it was not my love for James which made me so changed a woman, but chiefly my hatred of loneliness. Also (it may be) some little resentment against Laurence McKim that he would not come and bide with me at Thrieve. For I had loved to talk with Larry, and it did me good—wicked one that I was—to think of his pique and bitterness, his fierce, far-wandering days and sleepless nights about the woods of Sweetheart, when he knew me of a reality wedded to James Douglas, and that he would never carve out puppets nor set mill-wheels birling for me again till the world's end.

Yes, it was wicked, that I know. But, all the same, it did me good to think of Laurence's discomfiture. So much so that once or twice I knew not whether to laugh or to cry—it was so good to think of, and I returned upon the subject so often.

Well, to Douglas-dale we went, and to Straven, where James had been born, in the little round tower that overlooks the curve of the Avon Water. And I could have wished to have gone on further to the north—into the Highlands of the East and the country of Murray and Ross, which were still Douglas to the core. But always James would not permit, saying (truly enough) that it was very well for Archie and Hugh to peril their lives by passing through Angus country, but that for fair plump pullets like me—it was better that they should bide near home, where they could fly up to well-kenned "baulks" when Reynard was prowling round.

For that was ever his manner of talk, and with such a wealth of love-making expressions, as "For God's sake, little lass, ar't not content in the nest that thy puir Jamie's love makes for thee?" Or there were certain ways of gentle and tender petting of women that he had, touching a ringlet here and pouting up a chin there, holding his head meantime masterfully to the side, and all with such a great big-framed kindliness and lovesomeness shining out of the eyes of him, that, by St. Mary, I wonder there was ever woman born of woman that could resist him!

And he had a philosophy of the thing too, which he would deliver betwixt a kiss and a pat, being ever a great one for the externalities of love—the which indeed it is foolish and vain of any woman to despise, at least, in kindness to herself.

"Sparrows," he would cry out, laughing, "will not let themselves be caught unless you bob them on the tails!"

"Go, throw salt on them!" I corrected; "that is the way the saw runs in Galloway!" And at this he would let out of him a great *ran-ta-ra* of laughter, patting me on the cheek meantime.

"Sparrows wag their tails in the same fashion all the world over!" he would say. "It is the only true Vulgate!"

But what he meant I do not know. I give it only as his manner of talk. Yet these were none such ill days (I deny it not), when James Douglas for a little time was all the world to me—yea, even that new world the Spanish folk begin to prate so greatly of in these last years.

But even then I knew, somehow, that it could not last. James had gotten far ben with the King, as it seemed, whom he hoped to use for his own purposes. But there were cleverer heads about the council-board of James Stewart than that hard nut of James Douglas's. Crichton had the brains of a dozen such, and sat silently drinking water while James, his eyes stelled in his head, gulped down the clary-wine with a "*Lusty, lively, tra-la-la!*"

My poor James, he never, I think, meant any great wrong. But he was made rudely and, finding within himself a particular power, he carried himself like a free man at his trade, which was to be hail-fellow, stand-to-it with all the world, but especially with all the women thereof.

Now there, on the other hand, was Angus, our cousin, the head of the easterly House, called the Red Douglas. He desired to be great with the King, but being a spiritless, unplucked clown, dared not do aught against his name and kin so long as cousin Will lived. And even now, if James had flown at his throat in the market-place of Edinburgh, or even flashed a bright broadsword

before his eyes, that had been the end of the treachery of my Lord of Angus. For he was of the sort of folk who were frighted with the mere waft of James Douglas's coat-tails, or intimidated with his high, big, sturdy voice, and the burly, touch-me-who-dare swagger of his carriage.

But James would take no trouble about anything.

"Why should I cause my Lord of Angus go change his body linen?" he would cry, in his broad jesting way. "Give him instead a bairn's go-cart and, in hours of ease, a pottle-pot of whey-and-water to suck at. These will fit better than crossing swords with me!"

But all the while James was idle, the enemies of the Douglas were hard at it making their plans and plotting their conjurations—the new Earl meantime riding the country with a gay retinue of knights and gentlemen. Oftentimes would I speak to him about the matter, but he had ever some new turn of speech to take me off.

"They are but poor barren scoundrels," he would say. "Am I not Earl to-day? And even when I was only poor Jamie, the Master of Douglas, could I not undertake to thraw the necks of any score of them? Will did not take the right way with such-like. He was always for making himself greater than they in the State —Lieutenant-General, Regent, what not? Now for me, I have my castles, my lands, my wife. I meddle with none—and you will see to it, fearful little one, that none shall meddle with James Douglas, so long as he can cock his bonnet and hold a good lance in rest!"

And as he said this he looked so gallant, so full of the juice and sap of life, so flourishing, so succulent, in the flower of his age and the pith of his manhood, that it seemed as if he could not fail in anything. It was the opposite with Will, who never seemed as if he could do anything great, being simple in dress and appearance—nothing indeed remarkable about him anywhere save the eyes burning dark under the thick-thatched pent of his brows.

And, indeed, in a way it was true. None would have stirred James Douglas, Sunday or weekday, tilt or tour-

ney, at mass, or vespers or at sermon, had it not been for James Douglas's own folly, which in the end wrought his destruction.

But so it was written, and his Fate who shall escape! Certainly not James Douglas, for he rushed upon it as a hill torrent seeks the sea.

Now I have said already that after James came to the Thrieve I saw but little of Maud Lindsay, and when I did, it seemed that she looked at me with clouded eye and an averted face.

Yet I could not tell why, unless it was for some reason which concerned the sorrow and pain of Laurence McKim, her husband's brother. But it was not—being something deeper and less easy to be spoken about, at least at the time.

Now James did never choose to be long away from Thrieve. And this, he said, was for my sake—because it was my castle, and I loved it so much; he, too, loved everything about it. The which complacency I found very good and thoughful of him. Indeed he was, as it seemed to me, ever most considerate to me and to everyone within the walls of Thrieve, and in all the lands about. So that everyone, gentle and simple, loved him—all, that is, except Maud Lindsay.

Then as a time came when I could no longer ride with him, being feeble and inclined to rest long on the couch of my boudoir, reading, or listening to Maud's quiet murmur of talk—James, a great, healthsome, hearty man, naturally enough took to hunting, sometimes in company but oftener alone. For when he chased the deer with hounds, he was so splendidly mounted and conned the country so well that it was easy for him to leave his attendants behind. Also, knowing that their master loved to vaunt himself of this afterwards to me and to others (such being his nature), these huntsmen and attendants would let themselves be outstripped, yet not easily, whipping and spurring like men that did their best, yet losing the foremost rider at every stride.

And about the full tide of evening James would enter, covered with the green splashed ooze of the marish

places, his horse bemired to the stirrups in the peat bogs, and with such tales of hairbreadth 'scapes to tell that till bedtime was all too short to hear them. That little vixen Maud would rise at the entrance of the hunter to leave us two alone. And then James would tell his tales, and drink and yawn till, if I had not called to him, he would have fallen asleep in his chair where he sat, still nodding and recounting.

All which was natural enough in a man who had been all day among the hills riding as only James Douglas could ride. But though this was my own thought, who had most to do with the matter, I could see well that Sholto loved not such ways. He firmed his mouth, and set himself more tightly to drilling his men, exercising them at archery and pike practice. Or he gat great droves of beasts from the hills of Kells and Minnigaff, both sheep and grosser bestial, and brought them home to Thrieve; then he set to smoking and salting them, as if he had been providing for a siege.

Every morning James Douglas would call to him to come a-hunting on the braes of Balmaghie, as he passed out with the joyous baying of hounds and the blown breath of horns. But Sholto would ever excuse himself, and let the gay train pass him by, their noise returning from far over the still and sleeping waters, till it was dulled and shut off by the heathery knowes and banks of green bracken that circled the isle.

And as for me, loving James as I did, and believing in him, I would lie dreaming of him, wondering where he was, and smiling as I thought how assuredly he was outstripping all his companions, and bringing down a monarch of the hill, some stag of ten or twelve.

Yet I might have known. It was no mighty buck that James departed in pursuit of, kissing his hand to me from the top of the Hiding Hill, but the tenderest doe of all the covert; no wild boar stirred from his lair in the Dee marshes, turning with red eyes and gleaming tushes to do battle for his life; rather he sought to take a poor man's one ewe lamb, which parted his meal with him, and in the night season lay in his bosom.

CHAPTER XXVI

THE ONE EWE LAMB

It was early borne in upon me that James Douglas would not long make any woman happy—no, nor yet any people over whom he might bear rule. He was that most insidious of self-deceivers, the ill-doer who never means ill to any.

I remember yet the day when the knowledge first came upon me. A great, high gallant day it was in early summer, the white clouds slow-sailing through the azure like galleons freighted from wealthiest Ind. James had, as he told me, gone to hunt certain dangerous wolves which infested the fastnesses of Buchan and the Dungeon of Enoch. He would be away for several days, and I was to rest in peace at Thrieve, awaiting his return.

I did not greatly regret his absence. The castle was so different a place, with James for over-lord—so full of the bravery of noise and pageant, of horns blowing, of the filling of bumpers and the crying of healths, that a day or two of the old quiet were to me (at least in my present case) dreamily grateful. So, in fine, my husband kissed me, patted me on the head, pulled an ear, and bade me go lie down and sleep till he should return with a pack of wolf-skins to make a brave bass for the cradle. For such (there is no need to make secrets of the matter) constituted my dearest hope at that time.

I still remember the long-drawn peace of that reprieve —the open windows of the castle, through which came, in puffs and breathings, the warm perfect wind of the summer days. I recall—with the exactness of one who recovers from long illness, and who, content with the surcease of pain, lies lax and faint with every sense rendered more acute—the plunging splash of the cattle wading

clumsily in the shallows of the ford, the iterated calling of a cuckoo far away in the woods of Glenlochar, belated and forlorn, and above all the dark flashing of the swifts' wings athwart the blue oblong of my open window, their screaming stoop and swoop from dizzy heights, two oft-times clinging together, as if playing at "barley-break" or "pretty pigeon," the oft-repeated *whish* they made as they crossed before the sill, like the hissing rending of fine silk, and then, seen, but all unheard, the same black wings half a mile away, beating the air as they went. I took all in with the net precision of the convalescent—sights and sounds and scents coming up keen and eager to my over-excited senses.

It was, as I say, a great drowsy day, already hot and hay-scented by nine in the morning. They were cutting in the meadow, I mind, opposite the Isle, as well as on the flats of Thrieve, and a fine smell it made in the morning heat.

So I lay long awake, half content with what was, and half a-dream of what was yet to be. The sharp *cri-cri* of the mower's sharpening strake on his blade hardly disturbed me. It recalled one of those cicada-crickets of the south, which in harvest used to awake me at Cour Cheverney even before the bell tolled for matins in the July mornings.

Thus, half asleep and half awake, I lay in a great and sweet peace. The castle was very silent. Maud had bidden me lie long and take my rest, saying that that morning she would go to the Three Thorns for the children. They were to stay at Thrieve till James returned. Maud desired not to have them where they might hear (especially the twins, Cuthbert and Brice, who loved the stables and armourer's sheds) an occasional rough-spoken word from some of the company that followed James Douglas. He himself, with all his carelessness, used none such—only great midriff-shaking laughters and oaths by St. Bride and St. Loy, which he had learned in France or elsewhere on his travels.

Well, so at least it was. Finally I began to bestir me, and had the wherewithal to break my fast brought.

Then I dozed off again into that sweet warm summer silence, soothed by the crisp coolness of the linen sheets on the bed, that had been freshly spread. But all suddenly I awoke with a cry. I cannot tell why or how. But I must have been in great terror. It seemed that I stood on the brink of an abyss—deep, deep, so deep and palely blue, all swimming with vapours, but with no bottom. And lo! James came suddenly behind me and pushed me over the edge. So I fell—fell—fell—till with that cry I awoke to find the sun shining outside and the cattle splashing and flicking their tails, yea, even the soft *champ, champ,* of their jaws I could hear as they chewed their cud under the shadow of the castle. All came up, clear and unforgettable, lying so. And this strangest thing of all I remember, that when James pushed me, it was not into the abysses of the air that I fell, but, as it were, into fathomless water, and through the cool, affrighting blue deeps there swam up to me as it had been an angel with the head of Larry McKim, and he said to me, "I have made a new mill-wheel, better than either of the others! Shall we two go and set it a-going?"

And just then I cried out, and so awaked, trembling and in an access of terror and dismay.

Yet all without cause, for there, aloft and already right high, was the summer sun, though it was yet morning. I had not slept long. The castle and island were silent all about; there was no cause or excuse for fear; yet I was in a cold sweat of terror, so that my teeth chattered in my head, and that in spite of the warmth of summer.

Somehow Thrieve seemed suddenly accursed. If a volcano vomiting smoke had arisen under the ilex oaks and while lilacs of the southward garden, I had not been surprised; indeed I would have preferred it to this uncanny silence, which to me somehow grew more and more unbearable as the moments, leaden-winged, went by like a funeral procession.

At last I could bear it no longer. I arose and dressed myself swiftly as I had always been wont to do. I looked forth. The river went largely past, flowing by without

haste or noise, as was its habit. On the other side of the castle the courtyard was quiet. No ring of bit or stirrup iron, not even the hiss of a groom gentling a restive beast —nothing in the world to make afraid. Nevertheless I remained terrified—in a great fear *because there was nothing to be afraid of.*

I went down the stair into the great hall. Silence and gloom brooded there in Maud's absence. Only one window was open, and the sunlight fell upon a glove of James's, cast aside carelessly, or simply not picked up as he went out humming a tune or whistling to his dogs.

Somehow this little thing smote me to the heart. I grew faint and dizzy with looking at it. My pulses thrummed in my ears, quick and light, so that through all my body there went an impatient envy to lie down and die—that I might be done with it. But I mastered the feeling, and, going to the cupboard, took down a glass of the strong wine of Malaga, which afforded me some strength in my causeless fear and foolish weakness.

But for all that I could not rest in the castle—no, not for a moment longer. So I went out, and just within the stable precincts I came upon a quartette of grooms, some asleep and some merely chewing of straws on a bed of fodder. And when they saw me they stood up blinkingly, and as it seemed, with a sort of dull loutish resentment, like servitors disturbed at a meal. For me they had noways expected, having kept track only of Sholto and Maud, their accustomed superiors, and of My Lord James, who was to them as a god, and observed as such in his comings and goings, his horse-ridings and tiltings.

It seemed somehow that there was a power compelling me to go and search for Maud and her children. Some disaster had surely overtaken them. It was in vain that Andro the Penman pressed upon me that, Sholto being with them, nothing disastrous could possibly happen. Nevertheless I was far from content. The heart within me fluttered like a shadow in clear water.

So surpassing grew my distress that I bade Andro saddle the white Arab, saying that I would ride by myself.

He prayed and besought me to allow him to accompany me. But I refused. Somehow I knew that I must go alone to the Three Thorns that day. It was not a long way. Across by the ford I went, riding easily, because Haifa loved to dabble her four white feet in the cool peaty brown of the shallow rushing water.

Then through the rushes and the reeds, with plenty of brackeny dry places were the rabbits scuffled hastily into the undergrowth, over bloomy knowes, where all day long one heard the *Whit-whit-whee* of the stone-chat or the *Chee-chee-cheee-ic* of the ox-eye searching for insects among the fresh fir-cones of the wood edges.

Then *splash—splash—splash* we went through the marshes, alive with the waxy flowers of the bog-bean, bristling with spiky horse-tails, and having whole fleets of water-lilies orange and water-lilies white, afloat on the shallow meres.

Then came the ascent of the little hill of Carlinwark, through the avenues of beeches which temper the summer heats, and even in winter made so gallant a show.

I paused as I came to the summit. I had seen the fair landscape so often that it almost seemed like my home. Down by the willows Laurence and I had launched our first boats, his kilts every whit as short as my skirts. Further to the left, behind the armourer's shop (they called it only a "smiddy" then) I had kept watch, throwing a stone far into the water if any intruder seemed likely to disturb Sholto and Maud in the ardences of their earliest love-makings.

Yonder where the beeches were tallest and oldest, a fair and gracious lady, the mystic and fated Sybilla, had first appeared to my brother William, presaging the death to which his love for her had ultimately lured him.

The children—yes, there they were! I could see them on the green playing at "My Fair Lady," just as the bairns of the Three Thorns had done for ages and do, I dare say, unto this hour.

How glad I was to hear their voices! There could be nothing very far wrong with Maud or Sholto, so long as they were at their dainty bairnly plays out on that

green sward, dandelion-studded and daisy-pied down to the ring of pebbles on which the wavelets beat.

But I listened in vain for that other far-heard, well-kenned sound, the ring of iron on anvil from the forge. The great grimy door stood open. I could see within. But the fire was black out. There was no one of the blithe brothers at the bellows, bare of arm and with cap set rakishly over the left eye, as is the wont of armourers' apprentices all the world over. Moreover, I could see nothing of Malise, that mighty smith, his apron (so they said) made of the whole hide of an ox of girth, and his blanched hair spraying over his temples as he tossed his head back to survey the final stages of some new masterpiece.

Then I remarked something. In spite of the ring of the children's laughter, there lay upon the cottage of the Three Thorns the same uncanny silence as had brooded upon Thrieve. Or, at least, so at the moment it seemed to me.

I got down hastily. Yet none came forth to welcome me, as I tied Haifa to the iron ring let into the gable at the peatstack end. None ran to offer me a chair when I went within. The family were gathered about the great holystoned houseplace which Dame McKim kept in the fashion of a new pin. White-faced, aghast, terrified into silence, they sat watching Malise, their father, who, his head sunk between his hands, was torn with a grief so terrible, so rending, so inhuman that there is no word in any language known to me which can describe it.

Nevertheless I went in, and the momentary darkening of the chamber caused by my figure in the doorway warned Malise that some other human being had entered in upon their grief.

He started up, his face dark and swollen with something sadder than anguish and more terrible than rage. I think for a beat of pulses he meant to dash out my brains. But Sholto rose and stood between us.

"Hush, father," he said, "remember—she does not know! She also is smitten—*even as we!*"

He added the last few words almost in a whisper.

Then as my eye went round the family of Malise the smith I saw that Magdalen was absent.

And suddenly, in a moment, as the lightning flashes full circle from the East to the West, without further word, I understood all.

CHAPTER XXVII

THE WHITE FACE OF FATE

AND I was not mistaken.

Sholto stood with his hand on the old man's arm. Maud sat still-stricken in the window corner. The younger lads read their father's face with a kind of awe. Only Sholto was master of himself, and, by consequence, of all within the house. Even his mother had been subdued from her torment of mourning by the young man's steady quiet.

"What is it? Tell me!" I cried. "Tell me quickly —all that has happened!"

Though indeed, as I have said, I knew before any had time to speak.

Then Maud, seeing it was for the best that Sholto should be left with his father and mother, wordlessly beckoned me to follow her out upon the green. So forth from this dark House of Doom we stepped at once into the great blue sunshiny day, with the whaups and water-birds crying aloft, and the airs blowing brisk and caller from the Braes of Cull and Castle Gower. But what struck me most was the sound of the bairns playing innocently together. They were singing as of yore the refrain:

"What will the robbers do to you, do to you, do to you?
What will the robbers do to you,
My Fair Lady?"

And it was wondrous wae to see the young things thus sporting on the grass, joining hands, advancing and retiring, bowing, and waving hands, according as their dance led them, and yet know that within that house there was not one, old or young, who had not a broken heart.

To escape their importunities Maud and I walked a little apart into the glades of the wood, without looking the one at the other. Then, all suddenly, she spoke.

"The Earl James hath taken away our little Magdalen!"

Yes, I had known it. As I said before, I understood at once, as soon as I had looked at those poor folk gathered in the cottage of the Three Thorns. But to hear it spoken for truth and fact was another matter. The words turned me sick, not perhaps with anger, or even sorrow, as it ought, but first of all, and before I thought of the McKims, with the ignominy of it.

To Maud I made no answer; words failed me. I felt as if I must drop down and die. But to die thus is not given to women when they will, not even when they pray hardest for it. There were the playing babes, there the green lakeside strath, yonder the birds, the red-painted heather, the blue sky; all as it had been. Yet to be shamed every day and all the days, till I died; that was the difference.

God help us all! We are weak creatures. Oftentimes it is the surroundings of misfortune, the pattern of the cup from which we drink, that make the draught most bitter! That Another should know, that nature should be so cruelly careless and indifferent—these things pique us with sharper agony than even the friend's knife in the heart. One is never betrayed but by one's own, they say; and so I was slain by James—James, who had brought me new life, the very beginnings of life, indeed, after those ten years of slow death at Thrieve, when I was a woman, and did not know it until he showed me. And now, now he had taken the life he gave—taken it, and rendered it vile.

Such a short time ago it seemed since he came riding in that first time with his retinue through the great archway of Thrieve! And yet, walking there by the side of the water, I never once thought of questioning the truth of the accuser's word. Besides, I had known Maud Lindsay all my life; I had known Sholto; I had known Dame Barbara—Malise; they did not lie.

Yet I made no protestations; scarce had I care or interest sufficient to ask how the thing had become known. But at last I found the words.

"Tell me, Maud," I said, with that curious chill calm which comes at such times, as if some other than I were speaking, "who hath brought this story to the Three Thorns?"

She took from her pocket a little crumpled scrap of paper. It was written in Magdalen's hand-of-write. Laurence himself had taught her, and she wrote clearly and like a clerk, forming her letters one by one without running them together as the manner of some is.

"Read it!" she said, "God in his heaven, surely you have the right!"

At first the words refused to form themselves before my eyes. I gat no sort of meaning out of the written characters, but after a while they seemed to swim up to me out of a glancing mist.

My Father [wrote Magdalen McKim]: This will bring you pain—to you and all, to my mother—but most (and most bitterly I grieve for that) to the gracious lady of Castle Thrieve. But till he came into my life, I had never loved any man. And I stood out long—long against his will—till the thing grew too strong for me. I can do no more. I love the Earl James, as a woman loves a man when she will gladly give her life for him. He is great. I less than nothing. Let him do with me whatsoever he will. Be not sorry overmuch or overlong for the pain I have left behind me. Be sorry rather that God hath made such a thing as I am desirable in the eyes of any man! But be never sorry for her who, till this day, had the right to sign herself

YOUR DAUGHTER MAGDALEN,
LITTLE AND ONLY.

Slowly the truth entered in—sharp as the knife of a surgeon, or perchance, more like a probe moved cunningly to find the root of some hidden disease. Through the unchanged brightness of the glad high day came slowly the intolerable certainty that this thing was mine—*my* shame, *my* sorrow, *my* cross that I must carry till I died.

And James had done this to me. Well, even at the

first I found the thing not inexplicable—so far, that is, as he was concerned. But Magdalen McKim, the girl who wandered far from her home to be alone with the wild things of the hills and the woods, what had she found in James Douglas? Ah, that question was more difficult, yet for the present it did not greatly trouble or even interest me.

"What will they do?" I asked of Maud, as she sat with her face firm, fixed, and pale as wax, looking across the loch to the sapphire ridge of Ben Gairn solid against the southern horizon.

"God help us all, I know not!" she answered; "the McKims have made an oath to find her first and kill the Lord James afterwards—that is, all but Sholto! Malise the smith it was laid it upon the lads. He swears he will hunt the traitor as he hunted De Retz. They have sworn a bond of vengeance, each pricking himself and signing with his blood."

"But Sholto," I said, "will he leave me alone in my time of need? Will he hold as naught the love of a lifetime? And you, Maud, what will you do?"

She shook her head, very sadly and slowly. The tears flowed silently down her cheeks. She did not weep. Only when one glanced at her, lo! there was the water running down her face. But not looking closely, one might have noticed nothing.

"Ah, Margaret," she made answer at last, "that I know not. I am your friend always, but a wife must go with her husband!"

I could not restrain a sharp intake of the breath as she spoke the words. They fell hard on me, remembering those things which I had just listened to. But Maud, for once not wholly enwrapt in her husband and her babes, turned and caught me.

"I meant it not," she said, "forgive me! But believe me also—Sholto will never be less your friend. I know him. Ten times for one it is I who bid him do this or that. But when there comes a look—a certain look I know well on his face, I am glad—yes, very glad to be silent and obey! Thus it is with women!"

Then I had a kind of access of foolish tears—the first. And perhaps, I have since thought, it was that weeping which saved me.

"Maud," I cried, "is it not strange that I am like the woman in the Scripture—she who had so many husbands—and he whom she now hath is not her husband?"

"Hush!" commanded Maud, "it is not good that one in grief should speak of such things. The sorrow comes from God!"

"And James Douglas?" I queried, "perhaps he and his sin also come from God?"

But seeing my mood, she would not answer, but held her peace and that wisely.

"This becomes you not, Margaret," she said, gently holding me with her strong young arms laid motherly about my shoulders; "you can do nothing here. Get you back to Thrieve. Sholto shall go with you. As soon as may be I will follow with the children. This is to-day no fit place for babes. Come—let me find you Haifa. Nay, do not go in again. The old man is mad. He sees red. There is the lust of blood in his eyes! Hasten!"

And as we went round the little cottage of the Three Thorns there came from the interior, hoarse and terrible to hear, the cursing of the smith:

"Man and boy, three score years and three have I, Malise McKim, served the Douglases, but I will serve them no more! They have taken all from me that I gave them—all—self and sons and years a-many. One little ewe lamb was for myself. I kept her. She was as the children of Mary the Virgin, as the little ones who scattered the palm branches in the way for Mary's Son, sweet and lovely and innocent. She was unto me—to me alone. Freely I gave my sons to the Douglas. I gave them to the death. But this white lamb, sole of the fold, born out of her due time, I held nestled safe—as I thought—within these old arms! And now, by the God that put strength in these wrists and anger in this heart, I will hate even as I have loved. Honey is turned to gall! Service to a hunting with dogs. I will bring down this dark house—

I will level it with the ground for what it hath wrought—God be my witness!"

At this point I could hear Sholto's voice say something, but the words I could not hear.

"Come away, Margaret," said Maud, striving to draw me out of the reach of that terrible malediction, "this is not fit for you to hear!"

"Nay," I answered, "let me stay. Part is for me, is it not? Am not I a Douglas? Did not you yourself say that a woman must go with her husband—*ah, her husband!*"

At this moment I could hear Malise break away from his eldest son with a kind of a roar like that of a wild beast.

"No, by Him and his Hosts, I will not!" he shouted, in answer to some appeal. "Stand away from me, boy, or you shall die by the hand of the father that begat you! I care not though I have served six Douglases, all of them good men. They are dead and gone to their own place. But this—this coward—nay, even now I will give him his dues. James of Douglas is no coward with his hands, but only with his heart and with his soul! Yet he—my master—that I thought to serve and to die serving, hath done this shame unto me! Out of the way, boy. I will go to the King—aye—Stewart though he be! I will go to Crichton. I will go to my Lord Angus. He at least is a Douglas, if he hath not the pith of a peeled willow wand. But I swear it, though James Douglas were as strong as Thrieve, and carried in his veins all the blood of all the thirty lords of the Black House, I would bring him down. I would slay him. The curse of Malise the smith be on every Douglas, small and great, that hath in their veins a drop of the blood of Avondale. Nay, you mistake. I said 'of Avondale.' The poor Maid of Galloway, little Margaret—no, I do not curse her. She, at least, hath done nothing amiss, and the blow falls heavy also upon her. It was an ill-done thing to fear her, being as she is. But, if I know the Douglas blood—if I know the sister of William and David, who died in Edinburgh, she will hold still to the man who hath done the wrong—because

he is her husband, because he also is a Douglas. So shall the curse of Malise also fall slantwise upon her—the curse of the old man left daughterless, the curse of him that had but one ewe lamb and now—*hath her not!*"

Sholto had come out, knowing by some instinct the nearness of Maud, or perhaps our need of him.

"For the present I can do nothing with my father," he said. "It is useless. There is indeed no need for me there. Gladly will I ride with our dear lady, and do you follow after, Maud, my wife!"

So, ever gentle and kind, and of a nature at all times to be depended on, was Sholto McKim—like him there was none among the knights in any hall of king or prince the world over.

So as he and I went gently up the green brae, we could see Maud gathering the babes about her. They came coursing to her knee like greyhounds to the call, leaping upon her, shrieking in their joy. But when we paused at the top, lo! she had gotten them calmed by some grave word. Doubtless they were already making their preparations for returning to Thrieve. A sedate little company they made, walking cottagewards—Maud in the midst, a bairn clinging to either hand, the twins holding her gown and the tall Marcella, walking discreet and downcast, a little to one side.

Ah, it would have been easier for Maud—that which I had to endure. She had so much—so many, rather. She was buttressed against fate. These babes were all hers. But I had—*what?*

It turned me cold to think what.

And there looking back from the top of the hill, the little cottage with the flowers showed white as ever in the sun. Who could have guessed that the folk therein, old and young, would never again be glad with the ancient gladness, never loyal with the old loyalty—never the same as the day before, separated for ever from those who had been to them at once masters and friends. Even when Death had set his foot on the anthill, and all these human creatures had been stamped back into clay, the blue above would never again be as innocent and clear,

nor the white clouds as pure and glad and billowy as they had been—yesterday! Hardly even then would these human hates and human pains have an end. For what is the hell the priests speak of, save the Evil growing ever more evil, from everlasting to everlasting—even as the good and the godlike and the unselfish shall flourish for aye in the paradise, the Garden Inclosed of God.

. . . . . .

Of that ride with Sholto I remember scarcely anything. Haifa had been chafing, as was his custom, and when we left the Carlinwark and turned our faces towards the tall tower which was Thrieve, I had a difficulty in holding him in—which perhaps was as good for me as anything else.

"We shall soon be home!" said Sholto, for once making a mistake which a woman would not have made—at least, I know, Maud would not.

An *éclat* of laughter took hold of me—scornful, bitter as when one awakes with the taste of gall in his mouth.

"Home!" I cried; "home! Ah, you have said it, Sholto, lad! Yonder is my dear home! I will hasten thither. My husband will be waiting for me!"

It was cruel, too cruel to speak thus. But, before God I could not help it; and that which followed is my complete excuse. I leave it to women to judge, to men also. Half mad, I set my white Arabian to the gallop, and, nothing loath, he took the fenland and the knowes of the heather, the deep matted ditches, and soft peaty common lands in his stride. He dashed through the Ford of Dee without waiting for the drawbridge, and I laughed at young A'Cormack, who came to the door of his guard-hut in amaze. Yes, I laughed, and tossed my hand at him mockingly. I was not in my right mind.

Then, as Haifa stopped, all foaming and breathless, at the great gate of Thrieve, I slipped down to the ground in a dead faint. I remember no more; but I know that I lay there till Sholto—who, to keep me in sight, had almost killed his heavier charger in the bogs and marl-pits betwixt Carlinwark and the Castle—lifted me up and bore me in. For my poor Haifa—he at least faithful

—had stood quite still beside me, doing me no harm, only snuffing, and blowing his white foam upon me in a kind of dumb protest and wonderment.

. . . . . .

And when I awoke it was as from death. Ah, that I had been indeed dead! All the pleasure I have known since cannot make up for the pain of that moment.

Maud was sitting beside me. The race of the Douglases of the Black was of truth extinct. But at least I was free from James Douglas. His babe and mine was dead—dead, as if slain by his hand. I read it in Maud's eyes.

I think I sighed a long sigh and shut my eyes again.

"*Better so!*"

That was the thought which arose within me.

CHAPTER XXVIII

I SEE A STAR

We were still at Thrieve. The woods were yet one manifest emerald. Only the birds began to take up again their later after-summer song. It was a fair place. But —how shall I describe it?—to me there was a veil over everything. Over the river something smoked black like a chimney that will not draw aright. A grey netting of mist was flung over the trees. At times there came a thicker drift of the same slate-coloured reek, as if the pain and the sin went crying up from the ground like the blood of righteous Abel.

Even the splendours of sunset over the purple ridges of Balmaghie, and the dewy clearness of sunrise welling up out of the east behind the wood-crests of Carlinwark were tached and bedabbled by that black spume, the breath as of the burning of Babylon the Great, mother of abominations.

Only at one spot did the countryside about Thrieve keep its ancient sweetness, and that was up towards the little kirkyard of Balmaghie—*outside* of which they had buried him, my babe.

There comes a wetness in these old eyes, as I write, that was lacking in them forty years ago. Then I could look with scarcely more than a dry hot twitching of the throat at the place. But now, grown old and once more verging on childhood, the tears come great and salt—though not easily as they used to do at Cour Cheverney, or at Thrieve during those ten years when I fretted waiting for that which was to bring me so much pain when I gat it.

For the rest I can hardly tell the wonderful thoughts that came into my head during these days. I had

changed my chamber from the south side, where the black reek seemed to whirl and drift most thickly (though all the time I knew it was only in my head!) to the north, from which, up the splendid pathway of the broad undivided river, glancing crystal-clear, I could see the ridge, behind which was Balmaghie's little white kirk, with the birds singing in the lilac bushes under which he lay, just outside the wall of consecration (but within God's heavenly acre), my bairn—the Douglas who had never had a name or a title when they laid him in earth.

Then at morn, at the very first breaking of it, green and infinite as if the Dawn of Dawns were indeed come, I was used to rise and look out of that northward window. Yonder, pearl-clear and unsullied amid the green, glowed his grave—yes, his. And I could not help but think of him as like That Other who had His grave in a green garden—the Sinless One who died for the sins of others.

And Above, where she sat at her Son's feet, the Mother Mary was not angry when I thought of this, but smiled and was well-pleased. So that for a moment the clouds were rolled aside. The sky glowed white and blue, the Holy Virgin's colours, and, till the darkness shut down and the eager pain banked up again in my heart, I could even put up a prayer to Mary and her Son.

To God I could not pray. For He, I knew, was going to punish James for his wrong-doing—and in that, though I could not forget, I desired to have no part. It was not that I did not forgive. For myself I did—yes, from the first. But that dear dead babe cried from the ground. And once, in the silence of the night I heard him cry, and I awoke and looked, and lo! to the north, clear and wonderful, a star.

Then I put on my clothes very quietly, and, passing on tiptoe the door of the chamber where Maud slumbered, tired out with her manifold anxieties, then out by the little private gate, I slipped past the sentries like a ghost till on the shingle without I found a skiff moored. I pushed across the black pool, striking the water at random, sometimes with one oar, sometimes with two, but keeping

my eyes always on the star. How it shone—large and pure and gracious, like the rising of the harvest moon over the serried sheaves of corn! By-and-by I came to the land, or rather it pushed itself softly against the boat. A place deep-hidden among lush meadow grasses it was. Often, and in vain, I have tried to find it since.

Dew-wet above, sponge-soft underneath it must have been, but of that I have no memory. Certain tall marish grasses I remember shaking their heads as I went by. Then came the acrid smell of bog-bean at night, of wet Queen-of-the-Meadow also, which thrust a tassel of blonde dripping fur into my face. I gathered my gown and sped northward—mine eyes on the star. I feared—oh, how I feared that it would fade before I gat there—the way was so long!

Yes, I prayed that it might not! For I thought—I seemed to feel that all was in that. If I saw the light when I reached the spot, my babe (whom they had buried unblessed by priestly hand) would see the Face of God and lie on the bosom of that Other Mother, whose benediction would not be lacking. Also I thought that James, after God had reckoned with him on earth, might also be forgiven. Perhaps. At least I prayed so.

So I ran on, eager and forgetful of all, save what God was to do for me, and the babe and James—and, yes—for that poor unhappy girl also, that Magdalen, whose beauty had tempted my—no, I could not call him *that* —had tempted James Douglas to his fate! For such are one woman's best thoughts of another!

Then was strength given me, not of myself, not the strength of my poor limbs, made weak by suffering. But something quite different—out of me, of divine gift, marvellous.

On and on I went, till the marshes gave way to the dryer field-pastures with the starting sheep, and then, hedged with thorns and prickles, came little patches of yellowing corn. And once in a hollow I lost the light, and I fell prone on my face. But not till long afterwards did I know myself hurt. For in a moment I was up again and ran on. And lo! the light as I came nearer,

grew more bright; but, as it were, divided and scattered here and there among the gravestones.

And I heard a sound of singing as if a myriad of the heavenly host was chanting a psalm in honour of a little babe. So I ran fast and faster, lest all might vanish like a dream of the night, be ended like the song of a bird, when, being frighted, it flies from one wood to another far away.

For this reason I grew cautious, as those who see visions must often be. I had heard of the tricks the Little People play. So I went a-tiptoe to the gable end of the kirk, knowing I could come to no harm there. The kirkyard lay beyond. The kirk itself rose black above, as it seemed, cutting hard against the stars, making a blank in heaven. And over the rigging, lo, a soft gleaming of light from below! All the winds were still. For sure, for very sure, I was to see the angels, and die. What matter? Better so, indeed! Better for me and for the babe.

Secretly I looked, hiding my poor clogged body behind a gravestone. I remember now I was at once chill with cold and burning with fever. My gown clung wet about me. My teeth chattered. Yet for all that my blood ran hot and my heart beat fast. I was to see the angels—perhaps also—perhaps? But no, that could not be, and I did not want it to be. Maud had told me he was dead, and Maud did not lie. But if I could only see the angels blessing him, carrying his soul upwards, my little one whom men held not fit to lie within the hallowed precinct, dying unbaptised—I should be happy. It would be enough.

I looked again. And behold, the little lich-gate of the kirkyard was open! I could see many men in priestly robes come chanting, bearing great candles in their hands. One in the midst, whose apparel was most glorious, bore on his arms something small, wrapped about in white. And as he led the way into the church, priests and holy brethren followed with their tall candles—till they came to a new-made grave dug within the altar rails. And, looking through a little window, I saw how the man in

the beautiful raiment, whose face was hidden, knelt with the white bundle in his arms, and how another, more simply dressed in white, with bands of gold and purple over his shoulders, read out of a book. And after a while, even as I looked, the man whose face had been hidden rose up, and lo, it was Laurence!

And I saw him lay the little white, oblong bundle in the grave, and the priest blessed it again, and sprinkled holy water, and scattered earth upon it. And even as he stood there with his hands outspread, something gave way within me, and I rushed through the door and up the aisle till I threw me, as it were, across the very grave wherein he lay—the babe who was now blessed, anointed, and baptised, mayhap against the canons of Holy Church, but of a certainty according to the desires of Him who drew the little children unto Him.

I lay stretched out before the priest wet and shivering, they tell me, though burning hot with fever. And with my mouth to the ground I cried (I have no remembrance of it):

"Bless me also, O, Holy Ones; bless me, and the babe, with his father, and—Yes, I will say it, her who hath taken him from me!"

. . . . .

They lifted me up and brought me home, to lie long in the north-looking room betwixt life and death, and of the two infinitely nearer to death, for many weeks.

And Laurence, ere he left the kirkyard, bade all the fathers and brethren keep silence, for if these things were known at Rome every man of them would lose their frocks. "But," he added, "the God who made a man his vice-gerent on the earth be my Court of Appeal whether this night I have done right or no!"

And while they were carrying me home to Thrieve, they intoned very solemnly the *Laus Deo* and the *Gloria*. They knew not whether or no I lived, but they knew that here or hence, having seen what I had seen, a great weight would be gone from my soul.

And so, indeed, it was. For when, faint with the hand of Death scarce withdrawn from my heart, I was carried

to the southward balcony to look forth, lo! the black reek (which was Sin Unforgiven) had clean gone from off the land.

All was as the soul of my babe, newly washed like my own, my little *chrisom*, with the holy oil of anointing, though late, still moist upon his brow. So that evil at least had passed away, and for a time my soul had ease.

And as I lay long, holding Maud's hand, I asked her under my breath by what name they had called him. For a while she did not answer, and then said only, "Laurence thought it wise to call him William—because——"

Then, as she hesitated, I interrupted.

"Do not fear for me," I cried, "as ever, Laurence did the right. Though I loved him not, William Douglas was my true husband. It is well that the babe that was another's, dying unspotted from the world, should bear a good man's name in that nursery where such God's children are kept and watched and tended! I am glad indeed!"

At that she kissed me and I kissed her—for the first time for long out of love and with a full heart. And from that time forth I think I was to her even as one of her own children.

CHAPTER XXIX

DIES IRÆ—GLOAMING

LONG, long it was, that I lay tossing in fever, or shaking in chill, till one day I came forth feeble and white, the very shadow of myself. And during these weeks and months many things had been happening.

Without, the woodlands of Carlinwark had grown russet. The birches, struck with sudden frost, flamed among them like Bale-fires on St. John's Eve. After that, the trees, the lakeside bushes and marish greenery, had all grown stark and leafless in the grip of the frosts. Then, through the bitter spring winds and the hurl of the March snowstorm, milder days had come again, and these, when they arrived, found me still like a babe under Maud's hands.

Meantime of the Douglas, what? Of the fate of our great House, what. James had fled (so they said) and was reputed on English soil. The King had taken certain of his castles, but on the other hand Archibald, Hugh, and Little John (now little no longer, but a man of his inches) had convened men and taken other fortresses belonging to the King, so that all was a convulsed hither-and-thither within the bounds of Scotland.

This all came to me in bits and snatches, as Maud sat by my bedside and I posed her with question upon question. But there were some which she put aside and would give me no answer to—as when I asked her where *he* was, and whether he would ever return to his own again—I meant to Thrieve.

To that she answered nothing, nor would for all my fleeching.

"And Malise and his sons?" I asked.

Again she bowed her head and was silent.

"I understand they are with the King," I answered. "I do not blame them. But, Maud, why are you here,

and why is Sholto not with his father—not with the king—against us?"

She took me in her arms and held me very close, as her wont had been ever since the day I rode Haifa back from the Three Thorns, and that which was to befall, befell.

"Little one," she said, "now you will know Sholto, as I have known him these many years. This was the answer he gave to his father when the old man called him to come out and help break down the Douglases in the name of a brother's vengeance.

"'My father,' he answered, him speaking as ever, gently and yet in fear of no man, 'vengeance shall be done on the head of the transgressor. Go, if you will and do your part!'

"'That will I,' cried the smith, 'and, hear you this, Sholto McKim, if you stay behind, a curse that shall not lift be on your head and on your children's heads to the third and fourth generation!'

"Then Sholto, my husband, being of his nature noble and strong as a man, and yet gentle as any woman, bowed his head and made him this answer. 'For myself I take your curse, my father. But as for my little children, that is not in your power to lift or lay. Yet harken, when I came to Thrieve to put upon me the cap of the Earl's guard I was but a lad, and there was given to me and to the girl I loved the care of a little maid—even of her who is now Princess of Galloway, and hath twice been Countess of Douglas. That her second husband, James, has done us the bitterest wrong and dishonour is good reason for your fighting against him, but is no reason for my forsaking of my charge—one who hath done no wrong, but rather suffered much and long!'

"'Then, Sholto McKim,' cried his father, 'you will not come with me and the lads. You will abide by the Douglas. Quick, make your choice—it is once and for all!'

"'The choice was made from the first, father,' said Sholto, 'I can no other. I will not help a murderer like the King even against James Douglas. I will abide by my

lady Margaret, in the place where she abides. I will fight for her to the death!'

"'Know you that the King has proclaimed her also rebel and outlaw?' cried Malise, yet more bitterly. 'He has made accursed all of that family. Think of that, Sir Sholto!'

"'I have stood your curse, my father,' answered Sholto, 'for the sake of her who was the Little Maid. At the king's I snap my fingers!'

"'I also had a little maid,' moaned Malise, the great smith, 'and as a reward for half-a-century's service, my master that was took her from me. Shall I stay and thank him, make brave his breastplate for the tourney, hold his stirrup when he dismounts at Thrieve? By God, not so! My sword to his rather—the sword I made for him, I can shatter. The armour I forged, I can pierce. Who, if not I, can search the joints thereof, and drive home the steel to the dividing of soul and marrow?'

"'It is well,' answered Sholto, 'well for you—well for the lads! Let the McKims stand together for their sister's sake——'

"'And will you, who claim to be a knight and a soldier, be found recreant in that day?' cried the armourer, and it seemed as if indeed he would slay his first-born. ("If he had," interjected the tale-teller, "he would have had to kill me also.")

"'I fight not for James, Earl of Douglas, whom in his good time God shall judge,' said Sholto, 'but for the woman, my lady mistress, who hath none but me to stand by her. Where she abides, I will abide. Her cause shall be mine—her quarrel mine so long as I can strike a blow, or lift a spear as you my father taught me.'

"'And if he, the evil-doer, returns hither,' the armourer went on, 'here to Thrieve,' and if (like a woman) she forgive him, where will you stand? Will you fight against your own folk—against me, your father—against these, your brethren?'

"'Aye,' said Sholto, very gravely, 'if she, my lady, who hath no other hand to draw sword for her, remains,

I, too, shall remain by her side to the last—I and mine. She has been left by one brother—deceived by another! She shall have at least one friend—nay, Maud (here he turned towards me), she shall have two! And if it so come about as you have said, which God forbid—in her cause, the cause of the unfriended, I will even fight against you, my father, and against you, the sons of my mother!'

"The old man stood for a while regarding him stonily. Then all swiftly he shot out his huge hairy hand, grimed with a life-time's handling of armour-iron. Sholto took it, his face also steady as an anvil.

"It was a great thing, little one, to see two such men front one another, neither yielding a jot. Then Malise spoke.

"'By the Holy Name,' he cried, 'but you are a man, Sholto! I lift the curse I laid. You are your father's own son. But mind, if in the shock of battle I meet you face to face, I will strike and spare not—because that you fight for the betrayer's cause!'

"'I expect no other,' said Sholto, 'and though I know the death in it, I would rather take your blow than your curse. I thank you for lifting that.'

"Yet a moment longer father and son stood eye to eye, no feature of either quivering. There was no yielding anywhere. Deep called to deep, and was answered.

"'Till we meet!' said Malise the smith, suddenly dropping his son's hand. But Sholto said nothing. For indeed it was noways in his heart to raise a hand against the father who begat him!"

Here it was that, had she been permitted, Maud would have ended her narrative. I clasped and kissed her hand and said, "There is no one like Sholto, Maud—none so brave and loyal and true."

But she only smiled as who would say, "Of course! It is so written in the Scriptures. The stars have declared it. It is a law of the Mede and of the Persian. I am noways surprised. I have known that and more these many years! How could any think that man, born of woman, could think or speak or act like my Sholto?"

But I had a question yet to ask which concerned another than Sholto—yet a McKim.

"What of Laurence?" I whispered. For indeed in my dreams I had seen him oftentimes of late, and plucked with him the green birk to wind about my head, and placed therein the red berries of the rowan, and set whole wildernesses a-bickering with water-wheels and the jolly flap of windmill sails.

"What should there be of Laurence?" said Maud, instantly altering her voice to the hollow sounding and querulous intonation wherewith straightforward women strive to put off a question. But, being also a woman, I detected her in a moment.

"The truth with me, Maud," I said, "in this as in all else! On whose side stands Laurence in this quarrel?"

"I think," she answered, not looking at me, "that after the things you were witness of in the kirk-close of Balmaghie, you have no need to ask that question."

"But just for that reason I do ask it," I said, pressing her; "tell me, Maud, I beseech you!"

"Certes, Margaret," she made answer, "for a sick woman you have many askings. I will tell you that which I do know. Laurence has given his adhesion to the pact against James, Earl of Douglas, but he bides at Sweetheart to keep sanctuary for you there in time of need. That done, or out of need, he will shed his monkish robes like the husk of a hazel-nut and fight against his house's enemy by his father's side!"

"Then Laurence is against us?" I could not help saying with tears. "I had not thought it of him. Yet now I remember, he never had any true liking for me. He would not even come to Thrieve to see me but once or twice during these long years. If he had cared at all, he would have come, being so near!"

Then Maud gave me a curious look—long and piercing, as if doubting whether I was not less innocent than my words implied. I understand it all now. I did not then. I had so much else to think of.

"You mistake," she answered slowly. "Laurence is with you as truly and as fully as Sholto. And for that

reason he is against James Douglas, even as his father and his brethren are—of that let there be no doubt!"

"But why—why?" I urged. "Tell me, why is not Laurence even as Sholto? These two have the same reasons for hating my—for hating James Douglas, stands it not so? If otherwise, surely I ought to be told!"

Again Maud smiled slowly and subtly.

"No," she said, shaking her head, "not the same!"

"What? is not—*she* as much the sister of Sholto, as she is of Laurence McKim?"

"Of a certainty," she said, "but——"

"But what? Speak the truth to me, Maud, I bid you!"

"Well, little one," said Maud, caressing and quieting me, "do you not understand that Sholto has had me, to love and to be loved by, any time these fifteen years? As to Laurence—well, it is not the same!"

She paused, and I snatched at her gown, begging and commanding her to go on. But she would not, fearing that she had said too much, or mayhap had overtaxed my strength. Nor could I get another word out of her, though I tried time and again, but only a sleeping draught to compose me, and the quiet of the north-looking room with the curtains drawn all about the bed.

But ere Maud left me to my sleep she murmured in my ear, "Rest and grow strong, little one, there are more who love you to their heart's last pulse-beat than you wot of. And, as for Sholto and this poor Maud Lindsay of yours, they will hold you safe through the Day of Wrath which evil-doing is bringing upon the House of Douglas, or, if God wills it, they will die with you!"

Then, greatly comforted, I scarce know why or how, I slept with Maudie's hand in mine, and the little Marcelle on guard at the door to see that none approached to disturb me with so much as the ring of a halbert or a hasty footstep on the stone corridor.

For blessed indeed are they on whom God bestows the love of even one friend. And, as for me, had I not two? But I wished—oh, how I wished I could have said *three!*

CHAPTER XXX

DIES IRÆ II—WITH GARMENTS DIED IN BLOOD

It was on an evening mild and sweet as only (and rarely) late June affords that Sholto and Maud had taken me out through the great gate of Thrieve, a little way across the Isle, to breathe the fresh air, scented with the gorse and broom of the opposite Balmaghie shores, and the more memorable fragrance of the white thorns. Which last struck my heart with a pang to think of the little house at Carlinwark, under its three sheltering thorns all desolate—the love of generations turned to hate, honourable service to embattled enmity, even my Laurence biding his time to strike—only Sholto with me—and Maud. Yet I blessed God for these. Maud's gentle arm it was which supported me as I tottered towards the ford, turning to watch the grey old castle of the Douglases stand up against the orange hand's-breadth of evening light in the west, and to drink in the mild coolness of that mid-summer season when in Scotland the sun stays out of bed till within three hours of midnight.

The three of us stood talking of this and that—of the fierce fighting about the Castle of Abercorn, of which Sholto had gotten private word, of the Lindsays and the Crawfords, Maud's Highland kin, who were hard at it fighting for the Douglas in the North—chiefly, as she herself allowed, because their enemy Huntly was of the King's party. And in especial we spoke of the tide of war that ever seemed to be driving nearer and nearer to us in our high and strong fortalice of Thrieve, the ultimate and natural stronghold of the Douglas race.

But, as always, Sholto and Maud strove to draw me from the subject, telling me of the children, of their sweet sayings and brave doings—how that Marcelle could read

Latin as well as any Mess John—almost, indeed, as well as Laurence himself—how the twins fought fierce battles, for which their mother did soundly thwack them, but which she blamed their father with secretly encouraging—of gentle Ulric and David of the sturdy legs, just beginning to be a care as these carried him to the dangerous pool-edges of Dee and dark peaty deeps of the castle ditch.

But for me, though I knew their loving meaning, all would not do. It was the first time I had seen Thrieve thus, as it were from without—the place where I had loved and given myself without reserve, the place where I had been heartbroken! And there, beyond, clear upon its guarding ridge (on which the sun was spending his last beams), was the place where he lay, the son of one Earl, the name-child of another greater and truer—yet (let me say it) one not easier to love.

And as I looked this way and that, it seemed as if the old dimming smoke began to rise out of the east, behind Carlinwark and Kelton, spreading south till the bold ridge of Ben Gairn melted behind it. Whirling and circling it came, like a dust-storm wind-driven along a road by which many horsemen have passed hasting to battle.

Yet there was one thing strange to me. The smoke was no longer, as formerly, black, like the reek of hell. But rather of a purplish colour, like the ascending incense of some sacred service in a great cathedral, such as I had seen in France, at Chartres, at Orleans, and in the long solemn aisles of Notre Dame.

All the same it was there without a doubt, whirling dun across the green fields, masking the clear compassing waters, and even (so it appeared to me) making my eyes smart with some bitter odour in the nostrils. Yet Sholto and Maud prattled on all unconscious, which, when I had observed, I knew that the appearance was solely for me, sent for my sake, perhaps because of the wickedness and lack of forgiveness I had been cherishing in my heart.

The sun sank swiftly, as if pulled under out of the way, like a child's puppet of which its owner has grown tired.

There was a fear on me, and I wished it to remain above the horizon, so that it might be day. Yet it would not bide a moment longer for all my wishing, but with one great seven-league bound the twilight strode across the earth. There was an after-glowing of sunset—I could see, but all made dim and misty for me by that strange upboiling of purple spume.

Nevertheless, I knew the thing existed not at all save in my own head. But all the same I saw it, and its acrid bite (as of fresh-spilt blood) stung my nostrils.

"God out of his quiet heaven help poor harassed, thrice-driven, tormented Margaret Douglas!" I prayed deep down in my heart's heart. "Why are all these things heaped on a girl like me? Surely there are backs more stout for the burden? Surely sins more sinful than mine to be expiated? Why is this also laid on me?"

And yet in some wise it was merciful. The veiling mist was also on my spirit, whirling and benumbing. If I had been possessed of my old easy careless sanity, I could not have borne that which was about to befall me.

"Come your ways home, Margaret. It grows late. The dews begin to fall!" said Maud gently. And on the other side her husband drew nearer me till he could touch my shoulder and waist. I know now that he only waited Maud's signal to take me in his arms and carry me within, even as he would have done for Marcelle or little Ulric if they had gotten a hurt at play upon the leas.

For so was I cared for in those days—love striving vainly by easements of the body to minister to the deeper hurts of my soul.

But as I looked towards the Fords of Dee there came upon me overwhelmingly the feeling that Something or Someone was approaching by way of the Hiding Hill—coming on my account too. I could not see. The purple mist boiled and tossed tempestuously before my eyes, so that even Sholto and Maud seemed to dissolve and resolve, alternate, to pass and change even when I gripped them by the arms.

"*There—there! It comes—yonder!*" I whispered,

"down the Hiding Hill! I can see it pass Earl William's Rock, where he used to turn and kiss his hand! Do you not see it, Maud? Do you not see it, Sholto?"

But Maud made answer only, "I see nothing, dearest. It is but your overwrought fancy. Come within! It waxes chill. Take her up, Sholto!"

But Sholto with the soldier's ear, quickened to catch far-off sounds, moved his hand slightly.

"Hush, Maud," he murmured, "perhaps our dear lady is right. It seems that I do hear something; wait but one minute!"

But I, for whom IT came, could both hear and see clearly, in spite of that false boiling mist that was in my head, or behind the pupils of my eyes.

"It is coming," I cried. "Yonder, Maud!"

I pointed with my hand.

"Do you not see it?" I almost screamed in terror. "Yonder—by the blasted thorn tree on the nether slope. It is shaped like a giant, all dark, and rides on a white horse tached with blood. Ah, let us go in now. I fear! I fear! Take me! Keep me! Let It not come near!"

Maud caught me in her arms; at the same moment, as if by instinct, Sholto drew his sword and advanced a pace in front of us.

"Stand back, Sholto!" I cried in yet deadlier terror, "out of the way for Maudie's sake and that of the babes! Why should you also die? It is no mortal born of mortal—I tell you, but Death riding on his pale horse! And he comes for me—for me. Let me go, Maud. Let me go! I am stronger now. I had fear—I own it—foolish fear. But it is past now. I am glad, glad! I shall see my babe—oh, let me go!"

And but for Maud's strong arm thrown about me, I would have run forward to meet and welcome That which was coming toward me, through the dark waters of the ford.

As for Sholto, he stood still in the way, his sword ready in his hand. And the figure, looming huge and dark through the blinding smother of the reek and the gathering dark, came splashing through the ford. I strove to

cry out, but my tongue clave instead, stick-dry, to the roof of my mouth.

But Sholto, duty making him strong, hailed the intruder like a sentinel on guard, "Who comes to Thrieve so late? Stand still, or reckon with Sholto McKim!"

But the tall shape came on, wordless, making no answer —incognizant, as it were, of mortal speech, reckless of mortal threat, careless of life or death.

Through the gloom it loomed up like a man in dark armour—as, indeed, I had seen long ago—a man riding on a white horse, all splashed and furrowed with running blood, some dried and dark, some as if it had oozed fresh from between the joints of armour.

Figure liker unto Death on his pale horse with Hell following after, saw no man ever. But even as on the night when I saw the Star I was miraculously sustained, so now in some measure the eddying mist surged less dense and dun, thinning out so that by turning my head I could see, as it were, a little to right and left, though not yet evenly before me.

Out of the river, up the steep and stony bank, climbed the vision. But not noiselessly—far otherwise indeed. At Thrieve they heard the horse snorting as it made the last spring to land, and the rattle of accoutrement as the rider swayed on the saddle.

The white horse, its red splashes but little cleansed by the water of the ford, now stood trembling in every limb. The rider, helmless and pallid, sat silent as if dumb and unconscious—Death himself not more awful!

"Keep us, God in his Heaven, lest our eyes be blasted!" I tried to murmur.

But the sword of Sholto McKim clattered from his hand upon the shingle of the water edge.

"Help me," he cried, "it is James Douglas—come home to Thrieve alone, wounded, stricken unto death!"

CHAPTER XXXI

DIES IRÆ III—THE FIRST DAY OF THE WRATH

AYE, truly, it was James Douglas, all incarnadine with the blood of battle, his own and that which his right arm had shed. His splintered sword was glued to his hand, the finely netted reins were slashed and cut. His good horse had found its way to Thrieve wholly of its own accord, for its master was far past speech or guiding motion. How he had sustained himself through the dumb agonies of that ride God only knows; for James Douglas, who did the deed, could not tell, and, indeed, never knew.

Without a glance at me, without a moment of hesitation, Sholto received his master into his arms, laid him bareheaded in his hacked mail upon the grass, sprinkled the clear water of the river upon him, while Maud gently disengaged the englued hilt and shattered blade from his wounded right hand.

At the first sight of him the revolt of an intolerable disgust seemed to engulf my spirit. The reek swirled thicker, more blinding. Acrid, hateful odours swept across me in the dun, drifting spume. For one awful moment I felt that I could take his own knife and slay James Douglas as he lay there—that is, if he were not dead already.

The next, clear and lambent against the last vestige of the sunset, glowed the kirk-ridge so dear to me, that little kirk aboon Dee Water where our baby lay. There leaped a prayer up into my heart:

"Forgive us our trespasses as we also forgive those who have trespassed against us!"

And I stooped to kiss his brow, in token that I also was not outside the forgiveness of God. Ere, however,

my lips touched his flesh, there came to me a pang of the old recoiling. I stopped, quivering. For a moment my heart hung uncertain. Then, seeing a lock of hair cling dankly to his broad white forehead, I kissed that hastily, and stood erect.

Then the very peace of God seemed to visit me. The pale gold of a saint's aureole glowed behind the little kirk where the babe rested beneath the altar, under the coffer which holds the holy bread.

Then as they bore him in, speechless, gashed out of all cognisance, on the bier which Sholto had hastily caused them make out of bridge-spars and birchen branches, I walked beside. And a Voice seemed to cry in my ear, "Better than blood spilt—better than vengeance achieved —better than just hatred justly pursued, is the forgiving of sins—for love's sake—for Christ's sake!"

. . . . . .

Yet James Douglas was not dead—no, nor yet even wounded to the death. He had fought a great fight somewhere or somehow. More than that there was none to tell us, as for ten hours he lay unconscious between death and life. But Sholto, who was, among other things, a cunning leech (so far at least as the wounds and contusions of battle were concerned), faithfully cared for his master with Maud at his elbow, holding lukewarm water in a bowl, and a bundle of seventeen hundred linen torn into the finest shreds. Me they would not permit to do anything for James—though God knows they might have done with all safety. For I had overcome that which had been making a canker of my heart. Hatred should no more have dominion over me.

Still Sholto could not be expected to know that, though Maud Lindsay ought to have known. So I waited, still and patient, while they dressed the wounds. There was a terrible gash across his head, where his helmet had been broken by the blow of some mighty sword. When this was dressed Sholto turned his attention to the nobly-formed white body of him, moistening and washing away the stains of battle in the clear, soft Dee water with the shredded bunch of fine linen. Then at the place where

the gorget fits upon the shoulder blade, between that and the junction with the body armour, Sholto, gently softening and touching, came upon something hard, driven in forcefully against the shoulder blade.

With minute skill and caution he worked it out, when, lo! the point of a pike appeared, or perhaps the broken tip of a Lochaber axe.

Sholto looked at the fragment attentively.

"That is my father's own weapon!" he said gravely and softly.

"God help us all, what then hath befallen?" I cried.

He held in his hand the steel splinter, shaped to a point with a curious swirl like a half-filled spindle of yarn, quite distinctive and peculiar.

"I know my father's forging and his private mark under the peak," he answered me. "It was Malise McKim who drave that stroke which came near to slay James Douglas!"

And, as if responsive to the power of the name of his adversary, the wounded man on the bed turned as if pain-twitched, opened his eyes without seeing any of us who were in the room, and equally without knowing where he was. He jerked his bandaged hand upwards stiffly.

"Come and fight with me, Malise McKim," he cried, "to the death—to the death-grip let it be! Let no man come between!"

Then, as he lay tossing, he cried again, "Lead her off the field, I tell you! Take her to sanctuary—Archie, Hugh, Little John, do you hear? I am the Douglas! Do as I bid you!"

We looked at one another in wonderment. This was a riddle we could not unravel.

"Either the sword-stroke on the brain or the axe-point in his shoulder hath touched his reason," whispered Sholto McKim. "His mind wanders!"

"Not so," said Maud Lindsay. "Give him a sleeping draught—bind up his wounds with a plaister of healing herbs, and to-morrow we shall know."

"Let me watch by his bedside," I said beseechingly to

Maud. But this they would not permit, saying that with so strong a man, and one so sore wounded, nursing was men's work. However, being well aware that I would sleep none, I caused Sholto to promise that if there was any change, or any return to consciousness, he would call me. If he were yet alive, and the reason left in him, I had a question to ask of James Douglas.

. . . . . .

He slept all that night, and (Sholto refraining from calling me) I slept also, though heavily and without refreshment. I was waiting, I suppose, and felt the suspense even in my dreams.

Late in the evening of the next day Sholto came to my room and knocked. I had stayed there all day behind closed bars. Maud and her husband in the sick chamber did not need me. The babes, with their innocent chatter, would have fretted me beyond bearing.

"My Lady Margaret," said Sholto, "for a time at least the Earl James is returned to himself. His desire is to see you."

The young captain of Thrieve spoke with much dignity, almost officially indeed, as if washing his hands of any responsibility in the matter.

"I will come to my lord!" I answered him, as curtly. And forthwith made me ready.

The chamber in which James Douglas lay, swathed white in manifold bandages, was darkened. As I entered, Maud rose to go out. But I stopped her.

"Abide, dear friends both," I said, "henceforth what my Lord James says to me, he says equally to you!"

But when James Douglas turned upon me his eyes, bright with fever, pain-stricken and pitiful, my heart, wavering, well-nigh melted within me. But there was my question to ask. He murmured something of which none of us could catch the meaning.

"He is just awaking!" whispered Sholto. "By-and-by it will come clearer."

James Douglas motioned me to sit down beside him. The bandaged hand in fitful motion again looked wondrously pitiful. But there was the question. I bent

towards him. His burning eyes dimmed as if the reek had drifted across them again.

"*Where is she?*" I whispered. These words and no more.

He did not affect to misunderstand. He knew.

"*She is dead!*" he murmured.

I stood erect with a strange buzzing in my ears. Behind me I could hear Maud's sudden gasping moan. Then Sholto's "Thank God!" half fierce, half heart-breaking.

But once more James was gone from us, his spirit again eclipsed. As a drowning man comes to the surface to wave a farewell, so his soul seemed to have floated up merely to give me this one signal. But Sholto knew better.

"A cup of that white wine, the Burgundian, Maud—quick, I tell you!" he said, in an agitated whisper.

His strong arm went about his master. It lifted him gradually till James was half raised from his couch. He moaned a little, the new position changing the set of his wounds.

"Drink, my lord, drink!" said Sholto, loud in his ear. And at the word the spirit, far-wandering, or perhaps lingering near, heard and returned. James Douglas drank. In a little while he opened his eyes and found me sitting by the bed, at the foot. For Maud and Sholto kept the head on either side, "to be ready to render service," they said.

"I—have—come! I—alone of all!" he said slowly and painfully. "We are broken, destroyed, we Douglases—swept from the face of the earth!"

As he continued to speak the wine began to put in its work. A faint flush dusked his cheek. He lifted his hand to give emphasis.

"The Red Douglas hath put down the Black!" he went on more forcibly. "Even as He hath dealt with me, may God deal with the traitor Douglases—George of Angus and his cousin Dalkeith, who have turned against their father's house!"

Sholto bent over him, forcing him gently back on the pillow.

"Hush, my lord," he whispered; "who talks of the Douglas of the Black being put down while Thrieve Castle stands, and Sholto McKim is the captain thereof?"

For the first time James seemed to recognise him. Again he started up on his elbow.

"God curse you, Sholto McKim! What do you here?" he cried fiercely. "Am I then in the hands of yet more traitors? Have I come home to die, only to find Thrieve in the hands of mine enemy?"

At this came a look of his father upon the face of Sholto McKim, the first I had ever seen there.

"My lord," he said, "I am no traitor, neither am I a friend of James Douglas. But so long as the Lady Margaret remains in this her castle, I will remain to defend it. I am her servant. According to her sole word I will come and go."

"Then you have separated yourself from your family in this matter, Sholto McKim?" demanded James, wondering, perhaps, at something too high for him to comprehend.

Sholto bowed. It appeared no matter of credit to him. He did not wish to waste words; but James Douglas persisted.

"Are you then for me or against me?" he cried, again raising himself on his elbow. "I bid you tell me!"

"Neither for you nor yet against you," answered Sholto with swift decision. "I am *for* my liege lady, my dear mistress in all things. In that in which she is *for* you, I and mine are for you. In that wherein she is against you, I am against you!"

"But when the besiegers come to Thrieve, as they surely will, on which side will you fight?"

"For whomsoever my lady wills," answered Sholto. "I am her buckler, so long as she hath need of me. But if I go forth to battle, fear not any treachery. My father will smite me even as he hath smitten you—only more sure and to the death! He hath sworn and I accepted his oath!"

The face of James Douglas darkened.

"Then you know?" he cried, "you have heard the tale of Arkinholm?"

We looked at one another and James Douglas looked at us. It was the first time we had heard that name of fear and fate. Our countenances answered for us.

"No, you are true folk," he said, "you have not heard."

He heaved himself up with a certain pride.

"Now," he said firmly, "I can sit up and tell you. There is no shame—in *that!*" He added the last words as if recollecting himself.

"I have the strength—give me another cup of wine. I am drained to the white like any calf. There! Now I can speak of Arkinholm, and tell how the Douglases of the Black can die!"

CHAPTER XXXII

DIES IRÆ IV—HOW THE SUN WENT DOWN

THIS is James Douglas's story of the last stand made by the Douglases of the Black, on the green river crofts of Arkinholm, by the Esk Water, in Annandale.

"No—I bid you not to touch me, Margaret. Not now, I am not worthy. I am a man of fibre too coarse for you or any woman like you. Maud Lindsay there should draw aside from me her garment's hem. She should take away her little Marcelle from off the green down there, lest these eyes should light upon her unseemly, this breath of mine defile the pure air she breathes!

"But with men it is other. With men I can speak face to face, and if need be, hand to hand. To them I am answerable. I have answered and I will answer again!

"But it was of Arkinholm that I would speak. Not long time I have, lest my wounds break out afresh, or the wheels in my head whirl backwards again. You have heard—you must have heard how we were beaten in the north—how Douglas Castle, Lochindorb, and Abercorn were taken one by one. The lads fought hard and well—aye, like Douglases and men—while I, in England, was striving to get the King to help me retake my castles and enter again upon that which was mine own.

"But Henry of Lancaster, being the man he is, could not be satisfied to render a gentleman service and take therefor the consideration of a gentleman.

"He sat niffering and argle-bargling with James Douglas as if he had been a Crichton or some other dyke-side vermin. I must, forsooth, so he said, give him the pick of my castles to set English garrisons in. I must surrender the Border peels, the Annandale holds, Avondale,

Douglasdale, Eskdale—last and chiefest, Thrieve . . . that they might be filled to the brim with English pock-puddings, drinking beer, twanging bows, and calling us no better than lousy Scots and rough-footed reivers!

"'Your Majesty,' so I answered the poor silly Henry, who had Somerset standing behind to prompt him, 'you mistake your man, my Lord of England. I am a Douglas, and though to go back to my own country alone is surely to die, I would rather die with all my house—I would rather see, of all my castles and fortresses, not one stone left upon another, than that any soldier of England should hold one foot of Scottish soil!'

"Then I saw Somerset smile meaningly, as one who would say, 'What do you here then?' And him I answered, 'If my Lord of Somerset will come out with me into the fields for half an hour, I will better inform him as to the exactitude of my meaning.'

"So I came back to Annandale and summoned my brothers to meet me at the Johnstone's Tower. They came from Douglasdale, from Straven, and the North—those that were true—my brothers, every man of them, Archibald of Murray, and Hugh of Ormond, and staunch Little John. Not one was a-wanting!"

"And why?" said Sholto, his voice of a sudden net and dry, as the rattling of castanets. "Why did not your lordship summon your men from Thrieve? Were any that came with your brothers better soldiers than the five hundred you have here?"

At this the face of James Douglas paled and flushed alternate. Sholto watched him closely, and not Sholto alone.

"Because," he said, at last, turning in his bed with a grimace of pain, "it was a far cry—and I knew not——"

"Nay," said Sholto, "it was not so far as to Avondale—not so far as to Moray—not so far as to Wigton. Tell me why you sent not the gathering cry to Thrieve, my Lord Earl?"

But it was a man who questioned James Douglas, and at the anger in Sholto's voice the sick man gathered him-

self, tossing his head like the war-horse that scents the battle from afar. I think for the moment he had quite forgotten me. He answered as he might have answered Malise McKim. For of courage of that kind James Douglas had no lack.

"Your sister was with me!" he said briefly.

"I thought you said she was dead, and I thanked God, my Lord Earl," returned Sholto with further challenge in his voice.

James moved his hand feebly.

"Ah, for such speech betwixt you and me, my good Sir Sholto, you must e'en wait some while. I have discussed the matter with one of your house already. As he left me, I am not yet ready for the next!"

"But," said Sholto more gently, "as I understood your first spoken words—Magdalen, my sister, was dead."

Again the unwounded left hand moved with a kind of deprecation not unpitiful.

"Abide," he said, with a sigh of weariness, "I will tell you all!—Where was I when—when you garred me think—of—*her?*"

I sat at the bed foot listening in a strange quiet. It seemed to be of another woman's concerns that I was hearing. My heart, as it were, had grown numb and frozen, tingling too, but not with pain—more as if in sympathy with the pain of some other. I was listening to a tale such as I had heard when the troubadours came and sang to ladies at the broidery in dear sunny France, or in Scotland when a minstrel wandering to Thrieve stood below the salt, chanting his dolorous ditty and thawing the icicles out of his beard with the mulled wine.

"Ah," said Sholto, "tell on, then, my lord—that is, when you can—when you will. We can wait your pleasure."

"A cup of Burgundy!" cried James again. "Nay, let me have it, it will do me no harm. I tell you, man, there is no blood left in me. Ah, that warms! Ill for the fever of the wounds, you say? Nay, Sir Sholto, and if

it were—why, what great matter? The sooner under sod—where——"

Sholto poured another full tankard of the wine of Nuits. The Earl drank it at a draught, as in old days, flinging his head up to take the strong vintage down, and dusting the drops from his short crisp beard with something of his old careless grace.

"Ah," he said, "that finds its way to a man's heart, even if it makes the blood to flow and the green wounds to pinch somewhat shrewdly. Now I can tell you all, and after I have told you, Sir Sholto, I will beseech you, as King Saul did his armour-bearer, that you slay me with my own sword."

"I was never your armour-bearer, my Lord Earl," said Sholto, "but (as I think) already a knight when first we met. Yet it is recalled to me that when his armour-bearer refused, Saul did more and better!"

"As to that, we shall see," said James. "They fought for me, these true brothers, and are dead! One by one they fell, and I—am alive in Thrieve! Yet I have never yet been called coward. Only when all was lost, when Arkinholm was black with dead bodies scattered among the crushed daisies and dimpled among the green grass, when Esk Water ran red, and the Douglases were broken—then, wending my way out of the press my horse brought me hither, knowing nothing. Tell me how I came, Sholto! I would know."

"Why, like yourself, my Lord Earl," said Sholto, who, being a man, liked a man to be manlike. "Your sword broken in your hand, reeling in your saddle, wounded as it seemed unto the death. The steel point that smote you still in your shoulder. Thus did you come home to Thrieve!"

The Lord James sighed a sigh of content. It was his form of conscience, and so far he was satisfied. He lay for a while with his eyes closed. Then suddenly and as if seeing a vision he brake out, his voice stronger than before.

"They came as I tell you—Archibald from the north, and with him Hugh, who had threshed the Percies at

Sark as corn is threshed in a barn. From Wigton came Little John—all with their men behind them. As for me I came from England, and brought with me but one—and she a woman!

"Nay, sit still, and hear it this once, Margaret! Perhaps after that you may be in better case to forgive. At any rate hear it now!

"I would have left her in sanctuary in England, and did so at Carlisle. Yet stay behind she would not, but followed after—aye, even to Arkinholm, to the last muster of the Douglases of the Black. I begged of my brothers, Archie and Hughie and Little John, to take her again to sanctuary. But she gat them on her side, being determined to abide with the host.

"In the strath of the Esk they closed upon us, trapping us on either side—Douglases to take Douglases—George of Angus on one flank and Dalkeith on the other. They had the King's men with them too, Crichtons and Stewarts and men without name or holding, every cur that could yelp or snap—any jackal which, turning, could set his teeth in the lion at bay. Gordons, too, were there—Huntley's men, come to avenge their defeat at the hands of Mistress Maud's kinsfolk in the marsh of Dunkinty. And as we saw their Highland plaids we sang this lilt:

"'Where left thou thy men, thou Gordon so gay?
In the bog of Dunkinty, mowing the hay!'

"But they came more and more, like swarms of wasps from a thousand nests, from north and east and west. They hemmed us in. And when we went to count our array, lo! false Hamilton was off in the dusk of the evening, gone to make his peace with the King, taking with him a full third of our men!

"For that which followed I blame only myself. If I had been as good a general as I am a man of my hands in the day of battle, we might have burst through them all. But though Archie urged, and Hughie and Little John added thereto, I would not budge. Because *She*

was with us and in the rough-and-tumble of the fray—well, enough said! We abode where we were and about us the ring of foes thickened every hour, waiting for the dawn and the trump of battle.

"The worst was that the pick of these men there were of our name and family, Douglases led on by Douglases. But I warrant you George of Angus strove for no occasions of converse with me that day. Dalkeith fought like a man, but Angus lurked behind the troops—because, forsooth, he was the general. Strategem, you call it. When I fought in France by the side of the young Dunois we had another word for such generalship.

"Hand to hand, is James Douglas's mind on't: Lay on—no lack—the ringing steel and plenty of it—as indeed I gat that day a bellyful of from your father.

"So then we had to lie on our arms on Arkinholm, with one you know of in the midst, chanting snatches of song and wild rattling catches of which Hughie had great store. But Magdal—she, that is, for whose sake we awaited our fates on those wide holms by the Esk, besought us with tears to get to our prayers instead of singing such words.

"But wild Hughie cried out that as the Douglases had lived so they had better die.

"'What came after all of our own Will's niceness with womankind?' he cried, 'his conscience as fine as a threaded needle? Ask the little back window in Stirling that overlooks the ladies' court? What was the end of cousin Will's devotion and single-heart service to his love and his lady? The Black Bull's Head on the board of Edinburgh Castle will answer you that.'

"'Hush, Hughie,' I bade him under my breath, 'mind whom we have with us or I will break that addle-pate of thine!'

"'Break it and welcome, Jamie,' he retorted, 'as well you as another. 'Tis you have broken us all. Up in the host yonder is one Malise McKim and his seven sons with him (there were but six, but Hughie knew not that you, Sholto, abode in Thrieve). And doubt not that he who has made the armour for generations of Douglases,

who has tempered the steel we fight with, and hammered the armour that covers us, will to-morrow send us all four to gather the green birk and the yellow by the banks of Jordan's river!'"

(This to a turn, was Hugh Douglas's wild way of speaking. We could almost hear him as his brother spoke.)

"Then at these words she started up.

"'I will go to him,' she cried. 'I will beg of Malise McKim to slay me, me only, and to let James go free. In bitterness I will tell him my fault. Let me go. I will seek my father! You have no right to restrain me, Hugh of Ormond!'

"'Lie you still, lassie,' said Hughie, who, indeed meant no unkindness, 'lie you still where ye are. Jamie may chance to save you the morn's morning, but ye will never save Jamie. He hath tripped us all up by this day's wark.'

"Then fearing to hurt me, his brother, he added quickly:

"'No, that diel yin o' us is fit to better anither—except only Will, and Will's dead. Aweel, here we be four Douglases of us, brothers, sons of one father and of one mother. I fear we are but rough colts, and when we die we will go where they do not sing many psalms or play muckle upon instruments of ten strings. But this virtue at least we have. We blame Jamie no more than we blame oursel's. We will stand to Jamie's quarrel and die the death for Jamie—aye, and for the puir bit lass here! Nay, bide ye still, Magdalen, we will not let ye gang to your death, gin we can help it, my bairn. Stand up, Archie! Stand up, Little John! Stand up, Jamie—that has the most need! Hands about—this lassie-bairn in the midst! There!'

"Even as he said, so we did. He went on.

"'Now we hae nae priest. Nane o' us hae tormented Him-Up-Yonder wi' mony supplications. Therefore He is like to hear this last yin the readier. Join hands and say after me—"Tak' pennyworths o' us, guid Lord, but save an' forgie the lassie. She is but a bairn." *What*

are ye greetin' for, Jamie? Ye should hae ta'en thocht on that afore! Noo, after me, ilka yin o' ye, say Hughie Douglas's prayer—his first, last, and only:

"Tak' ye pennyworths o' us, guid Lord! But save the lassie, and, oh—forgie her. For, kennin' what is in men, brawly ye ken it's no her faut!"

CHAPTER XXXIII

ARKINHOLM

"AFTER that we chaunted no more wild songs, but lay still all the night till the greying of the day. Once we heard, as it were, the sound of a great voice on the heights cursing us, in words that carried far.

"We knew it for the voice of Malise McKim, and looked at Magdalen. But she seemed in a kind of daze, as if she kenned not that or anything.

"It was in the earliest morning that they attacked. We were posted on a little hill, the top of it plain and clear, but the sloping sides overgrown and cumbered over with whin and broom. From the east the light had begun to ooze up grey and chill. It was no ground for the manœuvring of horses. Knowing our weakness in numbers we had chosen it accordingly. So with *her* in the midst, and I know not what strange thoughts in our hearts, we waited.

"It was about the third hour when they came at us on all sides with a rush and much crying, shrill as are the east country winds in Angus and the Lowdens. Our archers, all border men, had good cover to shoot from, and thick and fast they sent their arrows into the swarm. Then arose shouts of encouragement and cries of pain.

"'Aim at the horses of the knights!' cried Hughie, who saw a chance.

"And so for a time they did, and brought many to the ground. So we held to it while the east pearled and we could see the faces of our neighbours.

"At first it seemed as if Hughie's good advice might turn the day. Because the horses of the Angus men and of the Guard Royal, refusing the hill and stung by the shafts from the long bows and the quarrels of the cross-bowmen, turned tail from the attack. It was not the

knights or mounted men who put us down at Arkinholm, but the lithe and swarming footmen who came leaping with pikes and leathern jacks to the hand-to-hand encounter.

"So blind were we on the hill-top that we set up a cheer looking across the level straths and holms of the Esk Water upon the retreating horsemen, and giving little attention to a great company of men on foot armed with pikes and swords who came to take us in the rear, by the way that is called the Way of the Sea.

"It was, indeed, Magdalen who first gave the warning that they were close upon us. Malise McKim led them, and at the same moment from every quarter of the heaven, the assailants swarmed about. They pushed through the green bracken of the braefoot, up the side that looks toward the hill called Burnswark. They ascended swiftly, clambering through the tangle of birchen scrub and scroggy thorn. They leaped the prickly hedges of gorse, and raced across the last thirty yards of turf, men falling at every step, stricken by the bolts from our bows or transfixed by the clothyard arrows shot by the men from the Marches. Another moment and they were upon us.

"Then a great misfortune befell. Our archers, who were men unskilled with the sword, and loving not at all to fight hand-to-hand, broke and fled down the hill, some flinging themselves headlong into the Esk and some trying the wildernesses towards the swamps of Lochar.

"But all was not yet lost. As quickly as we fell, so quickly we closed the ranks. The gaps filled, and we Douglases of the Black stood steady shoulder to shoulder. Could I have been sure that *she* was safe behind me, and would be content to bide there, I had even known a sort of gladness. For ever since I was a boy I have loved the crash of steel on steel. But in leaving my charger tethered, I had foregone some part of my advantage. For, like Sholto there, I am ever best when the lances are in rest and the visors down. But at Arkinholm that could not be. We were too few, and, if anything, our position must fight for us. Save Hughie's prayer that

He might keep the lass, we prayed no prayers to God. Hard had we lived, we Douglases of the Black, we would die hard, asking no favours, making no whining at the last, but taking without complaining that which was served out.

"And we gat it. Ah, lads, we gat it that day! Yet strange are the ways of Fate—here lie I with many wounds truly and a broken head, but still—alive, who alone deserved to die—the sin being mine own—the fault, the condemnation. There is, I wot, more at the back of God's justice than the priests dream of. Perhaps it had been better if I had died.

"But at Arkinholm fierce and always fiercer waxed the fight. Ten times we sent them reeling down the hill, spite of Malise and his sons. The sun rose. It looked on a trampled swelter of whins, on grass meadows delved in the soft places as with spades. Black patches there were here and there on the green turf, almost a wall of them in front of our array. These were dead men.

"But still there was no break. We stood shoulder to shoulder about the little clump of trees on the uttermost top. Beneath, far as we could see, swarmed the hosts of the enemy. They debouched out of little ravines on the sides of barren hills. They appeared like so many wild fowl out of the marshes of Lochar. Over the ridge out of the vale of Annan Water they climbed. There seemed to be no end to their coming.

"'Lads, we are sped!' cried Archie, after a while. He was not of a sounding witty speech like Hughie. But his heart was staunch, and (as they all did) he held his faith to the end.

"It was in a little breathing space when the foe stood still to gather strength and let their reserves come up. Ten-o'-the-knock it was, and we had been at it since three-and-a-bittock of the morning, hard as drums a-beating.

"We stood together a little apart, we four Douglases. None whom we had there could we trust—we who a year ago could have whistled up two thousand men, all belted knights with squires at their heels.

"'Harken to me,' said Archie the Silent (Earl of

Murray he was and a good man!) 'we are to die. So much is clear, good lads all! Counter me, any of you, if you can make other of it!'

"But none answered, for indeed no better was to be made.

"'So,' he said, 'you agree. Then the best we can do is to die like Douglases, for our House and our honour—what is left of it!'

"That was the one thing of bitter that he said, and then in a moment he made it up again as was ever our fashion in quarrels between ourselves.

"'See, lads,' he continued, 'you, Hughie—and you, Little John—neither Murray, nor Ormond, nor Balveny shall see us any more. Our sweethearts shall not kiss us nor we them. We shall never walk with them at morn or e'en, nor pluck the pink and the gillyflower to set in their waist-belts. But as for James, he is the head of the House—the Earl of Douglas. Moreover he hath what we have not—another with him here. Well, give good ear—his beast is in the thicket there in the midst of the array. Let the charger be saddled and prepared. Let him ride light. Let him take the lass up behind him with her arms about his waist, that his hand may be free for the fighting, which shall be brisk. Then we, that are his brethren, will see him safe through the thickest of it. We there shall die. So much is sure. We may as well die doing the best for the House. When they come again, will you help me to save the Chief? What say you, Hughie?'

"'Aye to that!' quoth Hughie.

"'And aye!' quoth Little John.

"But I cried out that we should all die together. But Magdalen—she who had followed me there—said no word. For though (as you shall speedily know) she cared naught for her own life, she desired that I should be spared to win through.

"It was not, perhaps, the kindest wish—but that is the way of women.

"So they four overbore me, and the beast was saddled to be ready.

"Then Archie spoke to the Douglas men who were with me.

"'The enemy will come again and that speedily,' he said. 'We four will drive straight into the thickest of them, if so be we can save the Chief. Bide you here. Give us five minutes' grace to hold the pursuers in check. Then scatter, and every man for himself! Your best chances are the marshes of Solway and the hags of Lochar. Will you do it?'

"'Can we no thresh them yet, think ye, Maister Airchie?' cried one from the ranks in the broad accent of Douglasdale.

"'Nay,' answered Archie, 'it but behoves us to die like men. Yet will ye give us five minutes? Remember, it is for the Chief.'

"'Aye, ten, twenty—an ye will! Never fear! The dam-dyke will haud!' cried the man from the Upper Ward—John Steel of Muirkirk the name of him. 'If it pleasure the Yerl, we will dee as we stand, every man o' us, married an' single, for the honour o' the Douglas and the luve o' the auld name!"

"And at this time I was greivously ashamed—I who had thought so little of that, of which these poor men thought so mickle.

"And it befell even so. For though the battle was thick and insolent about us, so long as consciousness and the knowledge of one man from another remained to me, the last stand of the Douglases on the broomy knowe of Arkinholm had not been broken. The dam-dyke was still holding when I came away.

"But for me, the end came so swiftly that, save for the heady din of arms, the crowding turmoil of the fight, I have but little to tell that is of any clearness.

"One thing, however, I remember, before I mounted—that is, Little John leading my horse up to me ready saddled. For on all our campaigns together, he would let none other perform the office, ever since the time that he had been my esquire.

"'James,' he whispered, 'Airchie (I speak it as about to die) never liked ye ava', an' Hughie no mickle. But I

aye loved ye, Jamie—sairly I loved ye. So mind, if ye win awa', that theirs is the greater deed! It is easy to die for them ye luve, brither mine. But juist for honour and that—no so easy! So gin ye leeve dinna forget Hughie, Jamie—nor yet misjudged Airchie. For me, I ken ye will whiles gie a thocht to Little John.'

"I had no more than time to take him by the hand for a moment—little said, I lifted myself into the saddle. Hughie and Archie set Her on the pillion behind me. I took sword in hand, and we waited.

"We had no long time to put it off. They came soon, with stormy cryings and shouts, lashing all about us like waves about a sea-rock—as Ailsa or the Bass.

"'There lies our way!' said Archie, who had, what I have lacked, the general's eye, 'yonder, where they are spread out on account of the swamps. Take the left where the gravel bank is more compact, that it may better bear the feet of the beast.'

"Then he distributed his men.

"'In front with me, Hughie. Lead the horse, Little John—that is, till it is time to let him have his head and the spur in his flank!'

"He reached up a hand.

"'Fare ye well, Jamie!' he said, shortly, his eyes turned away from me.

"The other was kinder, though just as brief.

"'Dinna forget Hughie's prayer, gin ye win awa'!' said Hughie of Ormond.

"But as for Little John he said nothing, having already made his good-byes.

"And behind from the pillion I could feel arms that clasped me.

. . . . .

"We started, slowly at first, for we wished to let the assailants win near to the foot of the knowe, just far enough away to get the charger to his pace on the open holms. And then to it with a will!

"They came shouting on. We four abode silent, and behind us on the ridge the Douglases waited, few and desperate—those who were set to die for their House.

"We four went down the hill, Hughie on one side, Archie at the other, Little John guiding the beast as carefully as if he had been foresman at a ploughing.

"Presently out of a little clump of alder and birch we emerged. As we descended, the wood had partly hidden us, but now, across a couple of hundred yards of green turf without an obstacle, all suddenly we fronted the enemy. They saw us and shouted. The die was in the casting. All of us gripped our weapons.

"'Stand wide for the axe-play!' cried Hughie, and spat upon his hands.

"The rest of us had swords, save Little John, who, for the nonce, trusted to a dagger, having to guide the beast and keep out of the way of my strokes.

"And so we drave at them.

"The crash came as quickly as 'two' comes after 'one.' We shore through them as doth a scythe through a harvest rig. But they were more and ever more, as it seemed, behind and before us.

"Archie was the first to go down. We came on Malise McKim and his sons (aye, your folk, Sholto, and they did the right. Never will I say other!) Malise struck at me with his lochaber, but Archie gat between and received the stroke. He fell, cloven. Then Hughie, left sole, with his axe hacked a way through the first engagement.

"But Malise had seen and known. It was enough. He turned, he and his sons with him. All on foot they were, one only in armour, a slight lad in black whom I knew not.

"'This way,' the smith cried, 'kill—that is he on horseback! If ye let him escape, I will slay you with my hand.'

"So they turned to follow, all the seven of them. More there were also with them, many more. But them I considered not.

"Doubly laden as he was and the way difficult, my good beast could make but little progress. Moreover, the end was not far off. Malise came like a thunderbolt with the rush of an angry bull. Poor Hughie turned to guard

himself, but went down, his helmet (the same the armourer had made him) cracked in twain like a nut. But the blow and the recovery had delayed Malise a moment. Little John and I reached better ground—out of the thickest turmoil of battle. Only Malise followed. All else were clear behind. He would have slain me easily, for I was sore wounded already in the unequal fray—half a dozen McKims hammering about us like laddies at a wasps' byke. My sword was broken in my hand. For I had given and taken great strokes.

"Yet once again mine enemy was upon me. I heard a scream. A weight shifted from the pillion to my shoulders. The blow of Malise the smith fell, but not first of all on me. Magdalen had done yet one thing the more for me. With her hand she had turned aside the point of the pike. It passed through her body into mine. So I did not die. But these all died for me—my brothers died, and She also!

"I knew not how she fell. I knew no more. I mind only Little John as he cut the lightened charger over the flank to make him gallop, and turned upon the swarm of his foes with a smile in his face. Of Magdalen I saw no more. The beast had leaped across her body in his stride as he turned his head towards Thrieve and safety!"

. . . . .

The end of the Narrative of the Putting Down of the Douglases at Arkinholm on the Water of Esk, as told on his sick-bed by James, ninth Earl.

CHAPTER XXXIV

A MAIDEN LEFT ALONE

It is not, of course, to be supposed that a man so grievously wounded as James Douglas could, at one time and without repose, deliver himself of a narrative so prolonged and circumstantial as this. On the other hand, that repetitions may be avoided, I have chosen to set it in a place my itself.

And so that being completed, it falls to be related what happened the afternoon of the day when James began the story of the Arkinholm. It chanced that Sholto, in arranging the bandages of the wounded man, ripped off the shift of soft doeskin he had worn under his body-armour. It was hard and drawn in places with the sweat and blood of the battle. But in a kind of double ply which had been recently sewn up, something crackled. Sholto, who had been about to throw the rags of doeskin into the fire, quickly ran the point of his knife along the line of unskilful stitches. A letter fell out, folded small and addressed in clear clerkly characters.

To Sir Sholto McKim at Thrieve, or in his absence to the Abbot Laurence of Sweetheart, in trust for Malise, Armourer-smith of Mollance and Carlinwark.

Sholto fell back, his face suddenly white and drawn. "It comes—from—from our—little—Magdalen!" he said.

Till that moment I had never suspected how Sholto had suffered. But it is certain that he as well as Laurence had loved the maid, he as well as his father had felt the sting of pride, the thirst for vengeance. Yet, so devoted was he to his purpose once taken, that he had made all else subordinate to the championing of my

cause, because I had been committed to him and to Maud. And other friends I had none. It was a true word he had spoken.

But he had suffered, and not till that moment did I understand how much.

Maud went quickly to him, and looked over his shoulder. But before she had read the first word she came back to me.

"I think it is fitting," she said, "that Sholto should first read this letter by himself. It may not be for any of our eyes."

At this moment James Douglas, rousing unexpectedly, saw Sholto stand with the open writing in his hand.

"Ah," he said, "you have found—her letter—I had forgotten. I was to give it to you if I won through. Read it! She wrote it at the Nunnery of our Lady near to Carlisle town, and rendered it to me ere we took our departure for the field."

He was wondrously collected, and spake as of a trifle he had overlooked. It brought back some of the old bitterness to hear him. I did not then realise that it was his nature so easily to put behind him the past. He could not help it. And indeed that is one of the greatest gifts the gods can give to any mortal. The man who would bring up the waters of Lethe to the world, would deserve better of his fellowmen than Prometheus, who from heaven brought down only fire.

Sholto went to his own chamber in order to read Magdalen's letter. James, who had tossed and murmured, was safely asleep by the time he came down. Sholto handed me the written sheet.

"Go," he said to Maud, "read it together—you two women. I can do no more. It is for your eyes also!"

The writing began without date or preliminary.

. . . . . .

"I, called Magdalen McKim, believing and hoping that I am about to die, write for the last time to you, Malise McKim, whom I have called father all my life, and to you Sholto and Laurence—to such also of my younger brothers as are old enough to understand.

"I am presently in the Convent of the Good Sisters near to the town of Carlisle. But I cannot abide here, having chosen a road which I must follow to the end, wheresoever it may lead me.

"Having much to say—little time to say it in, I must needs be brief.

"But first let it be understood and agreed that I blame no one—not even greatly myself! What hath been, I could not help! The wind carries the feather—the river the fallen leaf. The burn follows the valley to the sea, through deep gorge, smiling dell, and gloomy cavern, through dark pool and over foaming precipice it must needs follow on, till it reaches the Sea—which is Oblivion. So, hoping for that Sea, I follow my Lord of Douglas.

"Think a little, my father, before you cast your little Magdalen off—or disallow her utterly from the number of your children. Was she not younger born—left much to herself? The lads were in the smithy—Laurence and Sholto already grown men of their years. You loved me, my father. You also, my mother. But you dwelt apart. Your thoughts were not mine, nor indeed could they be.

"So I sought my friends on the mountains. Wild things loved me—even deer and shy-starting birds of the woods. On the moor the red grouse sat only the closer as I went by. I could put my hand on the head of the brooding mavis and her speckled breast heaved no whit the faster for that.

"But I needed love. All my life I had loved, it is true, according to my knowledge. I gave love to all that were in the woods and the earth and the air. But, after their kind, they gave me little in return. Perchance, even my Lady of Thrieve, reading this, will understand somewhat, and, if forgive she cannot, at least she will remember me with a less unkindly heart.

"Slowly it came to me that I was growing old. I had grey hairs in my heart. Nevertheless, there came enough and to spare of men and lads from here and there to tell me I was fair and desirable. And I—I had not even the desire to laugh at them. I only wished them to

begone, and if they stayed overlong, or troubled me, I bade my father see to it. This out of his love, fearing that he might lose me, he was all too willing to do.

"But now I see that I did wrong, for more than ever after that I was left alone. Yet I could not bear such-like wooers near me—these roystering soldiers of the guard, these holders of twenty shilling lands with the grease of the mid-noon dinner on their gowns, loutish lads from the farm towns of Kelton and Balmaghie, smelling of the stable—*faugh!*—I was glad to render myself again up to the clean air of the hills, the green shades of the woods, and the kindly beasts and birds that never taigled or wearied me, asking for what I could not give.

"But all the time I carried, unknowing, an empty heart.

"Till one gloaming I was going homeward, singing the song of an idle peace. A dove was perched upon my shoulder, and a young kid that had lost its mother followed bleating behind, desiring my hand between its soft lips. Then—all suddenly, I was stayed by the most glorious and goodly sight that the heart of woman could desire to see.

"A man came towards me on a white horse, his stature great and goodly as the cedars of Lebanon. His visor was up, and his face like that of a young bridegroom coming forth from his chamber, high and comely to see, yet noways proud. I had never seen any like him. He was clad in armour all lined and floreated with silver and gold, and his helmet shone upon his head like light. It had wings, too, on either side, starting up as high as the crest. A cloak of silk was thrown carelessly over his shoulders, blue lined with white, but the trappings of his horse were of a pale clear blue, lined with crimson. And he seemed to me like one of those great knights of old of whom the harpers sing on the village green when the good folk are gathered together—St. George of England or Sir Amadis of Gaul—one to rescue ladies and to kill great flaming dragons with a stroke of his lance.

"He spoke, and his voice was so sweet and moving

that I could not but stop and listen. Nay, I was not affrighted at all. Only the dove that was on my shoulder took flight, and I saw it no more.

"And then the next evening, I passing by the same way, he came again. And this time he was no longer in armour, but clad in shot silk of a gorgeous web, and with an eagle's feather in his bonnet. And from that day forth he began to speak sweet loving words to me, and I to listen. He told me that he was the Lord James Douglas, but that I must on no account reveal the matter to my father, or I should see him no more.

"And knowing him unwedded (for so by artful questions of my mother I learned), I thought nothing amiss. Also he told me (what I loved to hear) of his love for me, and how he would surely own me so soon as they gave him a title and earldom of his own, as they had done to his three younger brothers, Murray and Ormond and Balveny.

"And when, after many days, I found that he was indeed on the eve of marriage, and that to his brother's wife, lo, it was too late. I had no more any pride at all, and could not choose but obey him in all things—the which, indeed, the most part of women would have been glad and proud to do, as I have seen since in England many times to my inward hurt.

"Nor do I wish him to be blamed for concealing this and other things from me. For (this also I learned in England) it is the ordinary way of a man with a maid—at least, of such a man as my Lord of Douglas with such a girl as I.

"Now I should stop here, having, indeed, nothing more to add. I have written these things that you, my father, my mother, and my brethren, might know that it was no sudden-springing evil, nor wholly of his doing.

"But this there is laid heavily upon me, that where he goes I must follow. I cannot abide among this Good Sisterhood, all clad alike in black and white, who say their prayers and sing from morn to night, from night to morn. Once I used to sing also, but not now. They tell me that he has gone to fight a great battle—that it

bodes me to stay quietly here, and that if he is killed they will cherish me here all the days of my life!

"It is of their loving heart. God reward them for the wish! They are good women, and I am not worthy of one tithe of all. But stay I cannot. If so be he goes to a field of death, I will go, too, and help him to find it. That we may die together, I do not wish, for in that case he would die unsained. But I—I have this day confessed and been absolved by the good priest-almoner, who dwells in a lodge near by. But I pray God that it may be given to me to save him from death, at least for a while—and lead him out, so that he may make a good end, and meet me in the presence of God a man shriven and cleansed from the sins of man, a man as wholly forgiven—as if I, the little Magdalen who loved him, had the forgiving of him. As, indeed, I do forgive him from my heart.

"Finally, pray for me, my father! Pray for me, my mother. Pray for me, Sholto, and you, Maud, my sister. Sing a mass for me, Laurence, whom I loved perhaps the best of all, yet knew the least. Perhaps if you had been at home, my brother Laurence—but who knows? Well—God, perhaps. To him I do commend and commit myself, being, as is my thought and esperance, very near to death, to Mary the Mother, and to her Son who brought into the world kindliness for sinful women. Neither will he condemn me—hath he not said it?

"Dear hearts, from my heart I do bid you all a fair good-night. I shall not see another, if God please.

"This last word receive right lovingly from the *Magdalen who was yours.*"

. . . . . .

And when, all in tears, we gave the letter back to Sholto, who waited motionless by the bed of his master, he said, pointing to James Douglas, "Say nothing of this to him. He would not understand. . . . !"

And I also, being the man's wife, knew within my heart that Sholto was right!

CHAPTER XXXV

THE EAGLES ARE GATHERED TOGETHER

It seemed strange that after these things we yet lived—yea, and breakfasted, and dined, and supped. It was as if we had within the Castle of Thrieve one dead. Up in the chamber lay James Douglas—tended, ministered to, watched, the strength coming back slowly to his great frame and the manly beauty to his countenance.

Yet to each of us the man was dead. I think there was none who saw him but in heart despised him—Sholto, who had seen him ride forth as champion of Scotland against France, the bravest of the brave, Maud and I, who had seen him come home through the gloaming, red from the battlefield, tragic and desperate.

But the soul of the man was in none of these—grown small instead, cradled contentedly in luxury and the gratifying of self.

Yet even so, and knowing all these things, there was nevertheless something of the salt of humour and kindly intent about James of Douglas which kept any one of us from altogether hating him. Of all at Thrieve I was perhaps the most pitiful, though I spent least time beside his bed.

He mended fast—his clear, well-exercised flesh healing and throwing off disease with the same large careless ease with which he did everything. But there were yet many storm clouds on the horizon. The enemies of the House of Douglas, the false and fickle friends and waiting indifferents alike hastened to take up arms by thousands for the cause of the King after the fatal day of Arkinholm, so that a few months found him at the head of such an army as no Scottish monarch had ever led against a subject.

And to oppose that array which marched up the long strath of Clyde, struck to the right over by Leadhills, and so down the windings of the Mennoch to Sanquhar and finally Dumfries, what appertained to the Douglas?

Only that one tall castle of Thrieve, the strongest in Scotland, certainly for weight and mass of masonry, the strongest for position also, set on its island with the Dee Water deep all about it, and such a labyrinth of fosses and ramparts, outworks and guarding towers as was possessed by no castle in the Northland. Indeed it is little likely that out of France there was any in the world that could match it.

Then the island, itself counted impregnable, was alive with cattle, all the herds safely lodged behind stone walls, every horn and hoof under cover, and yet with twenty acres of excellent pasturage wherefrom to draw their fodder. The country-folk, too, were for us, and it was little likely that for a long time the King would be able to make his blockade of Thrieve perfect, especially to the south.

"The castle can stand a siege of two years," Sholto said, with pride in his voice, "and there are many things which may happen in Scotland within two years."

Our garrison, small though it was in numbers, was composed of such men as the Douglases had never yet brought to battle—no raw levies, but the Douglas Guard itself—each man enlisted and drilled by the Captain himself, loyal to the name and the place, faithful to the noble traditions of the Douglases of the Black, to their mighty castle of Thrieve, both of which they believed destined to an eternity of safety and renown.

Yet all told, we counted only five hundred men as against the growing thousands of the King. And this of Sholto's set purpose. Indeed, he was daily pestered with offers of service by stout young fellows of the neighbouring parishes who heard of the advent of royal troops, and who desired to fight for the Douglases.

It was early on the morning of the tenth of July, when the watchers on the topmost towers of Thrieve saw the sunshine on the pennants and guidons of the King of

Scots, his army. They were yet far away to the north-east, following the ridge of heights called Clairbrand, which, under the guidance of some expert person (of a surety Malise McKim and his sons), they had kept all the way from Dumfries, thus escaping the swamps and marshy wildernesses of bog and peat-hag which extended to the south of Thrieve.

In an hour the vanguard was clearly to be seen, keeping closely to the highest ground and throwing out skirmishers in order to feel for any possible enemy.

James Douglas was by this time able to sit up a little each day. And in spite of the galling of his green wounds, at the first sight of the glitter of the spearheads, the fighting spirit, which indeed he never lacked, returned upon him.

"Bring me forth my war-gear," he cried. "I will go to the fords of Glenlochar and counter them there. Quick, Andro! Quick, John—the black armour with the silver work of Damascus in which I fought the Frenchman at Stirling!"

But on the pretence of searching for the arms, Andro the Penman ran quickly up to Sholto, who was on the topmost tower, watching the progress of the King's host.

"Sir Sholto," he gasped hastily, "my lord is up on his feet, demanding arms and armour that he may lead a force to block the fords of Glenlochar against the King."

Sholto descended precipitately to the chamber, where he found James already trussing his points, and swearing because there was no squire at hand to aid a man in his own house!

"My Lord Earl," said Sholto, bowing gravely, "this is not a venture for you that are still sore wounded. Moreover we cannot fight in the open. There they are too many for us. There be ten thousand men in sight—in Castle Thrieve are just five hundred—and quite enough too, seeing that each of them hath a mouth that must be filled twice a day with porridge and beef and broth. Get to bed, my Lord Earl, and trust to me. The castle can be

kept without the fords of Glenlochar. We would only throw away our men uselessly in such sallies. Let me be your assistant to disrobe!"

And he proceeded to put him back in his great carven bed of oak as if he had been a child. And James submitted, murmuring only with that saving humour which did not forsake him in the darkest hours—nay, which was most clearly apparent then, "'Tis pretty, i' faith, to suckle and put to bed-a-bye a ninth Earl of Douglas in his own Castle of Thrieve! Pray who counts himself the master here?"

"I know not who counts," said Sholto. "I *am* the Captain of Thrieve!"

And James of Douglas actually laughed, either at the conceit or at Sholto's grim-set mouth, I know not which.

Maud and I went and stood with Sholto on the balcony that ran round the top of the castle. Here was none but ourselves and the four sentinels placed as usual. All beneath was quiet, as everything from January to December had perforce to be quiet where Sholto commanded. It was a clear summer day with a north-blowing wind. We could see distinctly each company of spearmen, each group of knights and men-at-arms. Even the colour of their standards we could faintly distinguish, though they were too far off for us to note the various devices upon them.

Soon the tents and pavilions began to be pitched by the camp followers and sutlers. A white forest, crowned with a multitude of flapping devices, arose on the ridges, between the crossing of the road which leads to the Kirk of Michael and that turning to the left towards the Fords of Lochar. These lines, following the crown of the country to the north and east, were well-nigh five miles in length, from the ridge of Carlinwark to the little hill that overlooks the woodlands of Balmaghie, a hill which in after times and under a new name was to cost us so dear.

But meantime by the Three Thorns and just out of sight of the castle there arose in the westering sun of afternoon the silken pavilions of the court. For the King

of Scots, murderer and traitor as he was, had come to conduct in person the siege of the last remaining strength of his rebel vassal, and so finish with some *éclat* the work which had been begun in dishonour and treachery at Edinburgh and Stirling.

Now, since I that have writ so far am but a woman, and at that time, indeed, little more than a girl—therefore unskilled in the art of war, in blockade, breach, and escalade, I judge it right to insert in this place the descriptions of another, who saw what we could not from the ramparts of Thrieve—that is, the preparations which were made by the King's engineers to reduce our famous fortalice.

Now there was at the time, under the shade of the Three Thorns of Carlinwark, and looking with curious eyes at the opening up of the long-abandoned armourer's smithy and the white cottage all overgrown with untended creeping plants, a certain young man, in the plain dark dress of an esquire, to whom, as it soon appeared, the King had taken a fancy. He had remarked him as he rode by, his favourites, Crichton and the two recreant Douglases, by his side.

"What is your name, sir?" he asked him, "you have not the look of a soldier." (It was at half a mile from Dumfries, after one has crossed over Devogill's bridge, going westward, that the King noticed the young man.)

"Your Majesty," said the youth, "choose you out a captain or a man of war. Let me try a bout with him at his own weapons, and (save it be Malise McKim, the smith) I will stand by the result, soldier or no!"

The King laughed.

"You do shrewdly well to make the exception," he cried. "But I have some skill myself with the lighter weapons. We might do worse than fall to. You are of slender build. The broad-axe is not for gentlemen. You can, I think, speak French——"

"Like a clerk!" said one of his favourites sneeringly —Douglas younger of Dalkeith he was, he whom they called the Master of Morton.

"Ah," said King James, "mayhap Latin, too, and all too like a clerk, Morton! But what care I, so long as he

will help me against yonder Earl of Douglas, who defies me and keeps the realm in a turmoil."

"That he doth!" said young Morton with a fury somewhat affected. "I would I had him by the thrapple!"

"His estates, you mean!" commented the youth in black, giving back the sneers. "I warrant you that you would think twice before you stood up to James Douglas with the steel points bare!"

"Ha, well said, young sirrah," cried the King, who in truth loved to see his favourites put down. "That took you fair in the wind, Morton. And true it is. Myself saw him fight with the French Champion at Stirling when I was a lad, and a better lance was never pushed than that which James of Douglas held that day!"

"Save that of Sir Sholto McKim!" said the young man, "he who is now captain of Thrieve!"

At this the King's brow darkened somewhat.

"What know you of Sholto McKim?" he demanded; "is it that you are a spy, or disloyal, thus to praise one in arms against his King? Canst tell me why is it that he, sole among all that family, is not with the King's colours? He follows his lord, and so stands to lose his head with him!"

"Nay," answered the young man in black, with gentle persistence, "he also hath his private griefs against James Douglas, and would gladly meet him point to point. But he stands for his mistress, the châtelaine of Thrieve, the Lady Margaret, whom it was Your Majesty's will and pleasure to cause marry with James Douglas, being his brother's widow. She was committed to Sholto McKim as a child, and now he would gladly die for her sake, though he is a man with young children."

"But the Countess Margaret is also in rebellion!" cried young Morton.

"What, the estates again, Morton!" laughed the King, turning sharp upon him, "the corn must be cut before you butter the bread, my lad!"

Then he mused some time upon the young man in black.

"From whom had you these things?" he demanded.

"You do not speak like one of this neighbourhood. These are no countryside manners. Whence come you?"

"My name I cannot tell, at this present," the young man answered, "but Malise McKim and his sons will vouch for me that I am no spy. Your Archbishop of Saint Andro's or my Lord of Dunkeld will do the same that I am no runaway priest. And for the rest, I have been much abroad—in France more than once. I have ridden in the lists at Paris and Amboise. I have been at Rome. But, being all the loyaler a Scot for these things, if it please you to employ me without a name, I shall e'en render Your Majesty such service that he will give me a name—be it the meanest in his kingdom. For as Malise the smith will tell you, I have a blood-feud against James of Douglas, and for that I have come with a squire and twenty well-trained men-at-arms to the King's muster."

"I'faith," cried the King, "clerk or English renegade, or what not, you speak right well. A blood-feud against James Douglas! Why, man, such appear to have been rife about here. He must have been a man of his parts, this same James Douglas. And a good drinker, too, they tell me. 'Tis a pity, but *Doom's dues maun be paid,* they say. Yet I would it had been another than Earl James who has to pay them. His brother, of whom they prate so mickle, was but a wizened pippin to him!"

At this the young man in black looked up with a glance like the point of a spear.

"Ah, you knew him?" he said softly; "you entertained him at Stirling, did you not? I think some such report came to my ears, though I was far away and in retreat at the time!"

The fiery face of the King grew purple. There came a red light also into his eyes, lurid and angry almost as the birthmark on his cheek.

"You are either a very bold, or, on the other hand, a very foolish and ignorant young man," he said, "thus to play with your neck-jointings. Did you ever hear of the Gallows' Slot of Thrieve?"

The youth bowed.

"I have heard of it, Your Majesty."

"Then," quoth the King fiercely, "I advise you to keep a guard upon your tongue, or in that very spot your head may chance to go one way while that slender body of yours goes another!"

"Your Majesty," the young man answered quietly, "I am indeed little fit for a Court, where nothing is heard from morn till night but that which shall be pleasing to the King. Call on my Lord of Morton, and my Lord Crichton, and my Lord Huntly, and the Laird of Drum for such like; they will supply you. All that I ask is permission to stand in the forefront of the battle with the men I have fetched to the muster. And at the end, if I live and avenge my feud, let His Majesty call me by what name he will, so it be neither Gordon nor Hamilton; for I love neither traitors nor false swearers!"

Half a score of swords leaped from their scabbards at the words, and the young man in black, as perhaps he had counted on, found himself within a ring of adversaries —handsome Hamiltons and Gordons, possibly gay, but for the time being certainly exceeding wrathful.

"Hold there," cried the King, holding up his hand, palm outward. "I forbid you to fight—anon—anon! This is neither time nor place. I, James Stewart, am of this young man's faction (here he cocked his bonnet), and if any of you bauld young men object to a plain word for a plain thing (here he laid his hand upon his sword hilt) well—he shall have yet another adversary to reckon with! Your whittles in their sheaths, gentlemen!"

Amid half-concealed growls and murmurs they obeyed.

"French lick-the-dish! Monkish runagate! Scented civet-cat! Nameless loon!"

These were a few of the choicest of their epithets for the youth in whom their jealousy feared a new favourite. The last came to the King's ear, who happened to be in a mood to run counter to those who for ordinary dandled and daintied him with their tongues, half to his pleasure, and half to his contempt.

"'Nameless loon!' said ye, George of Douglas?" he cried aloud, "I tell you, Angus, my man, your own name

is in no such good odour this day in Scotland that ye can afford to cast dirt on others. And as for this young man—faith, an he wants a name, for some odd reason of his own, such as may happen to any gentleman —why, he shall have mine own! And I, the King, desire the man to stand forth from among you who hath aught to say against that!"

CHAPTER XXXVI

THE YOUNG MAN IN BLACK

THIS is the written story of the Young Man in Black to whom the King (chiefly because he desired to cross-buttock his sometime favourites, in order that he might show them that he and not they had the mastery) promised on the braes above the Brigend of Dumfries the dower of his own royal name.

He hath put the script, carefully written, into my hands, so that those things of which I, Margaret Douglas, could not have knowledge, looking out from the ramparts of Thrieve, might yet duly be set down—first, for the satisfaction of those who in their time were part of these things (now alas, but few!) and, secondly, for the information of generations yet to come—for all histories that have ever been writ do lie to the detriment of the Douglases, save only this of mine.

THE STORY OF THE YOUNG MAN IN BLACK

Writ at length so that it might be prentit.

As I walked into the smithy of the Three Thorns nigh the King's camp, I found some four young men or thereby blowing up the fire and clinking on red iron. Right sulkily they regarded me upon my entrance. For it was long time since they had seen me and never in such a garb.

"The King hath given orders that none are to enter here," cried the eldest, "saving those who have care of his armouries, and of these only such as are fit to be deacons of the guild of hammermen. We want no fine gentlemen here, God wot—there is room and to spare for such elsewhere!"

And the second said, "The smiddy door stands wide! Go out by it, I pray thee and that quickly, or I will break thy head with a pair of cleps!"

"Nay, keep him," cried a third, "we will make of him a whipcord to bind a trace withal!"

For I had pulled my cap low over mine eyes and in my altered habiliments it fell out easily that they knew me not. Indeed, for all their rough words, they kept steadily to their work at the forge.

"I am no fine gentleman," I made answer, very quietly, "but of your own guild, and, if it please you, not wholly unfit to be a deacon therein!"

"You are a hammerman—of the King's armourers—let us see yours palms!"

And at that they laughed, setting their own hands on their hips and laughing. For, indeed, my finger pads were fine and unhardened.

"Canst put shoes on war-horse?" cried one, "or so much as tell the hind foot from the fore?"

"Aye, or a jimp court filly, mayhap!"—shouted another, "get thee gone!—Thou lookest more fit to lace a jupe, like a woman's tailor—wide at the flounce, narrow at the gathers—than to rivet a brigantine or to forge the chainwork bandolier for a King's sword. There is one in the fire now—try thy hand at it, boaster, if thou darest!"

Now this task was, and with justice, accounted one of the most difficult of all the practices of armoury, and one which commonly only the chief armourer himself undertook. But I had been taught by one that was a master of masters in the craft and feared nothing.

So with the pincers I pulled the rivet bolt which was to close the main ring out of the fire, and looking with apparent carelessness (but really most carefully) to the degree of heat, I thrust it in again, and bade the elder of the youths be ready to strike for me when the colour of the steel pleased me. Then he, having a certain fear before his eyes, would have drawn back, seeing me so determined.

"Our father is no easy man to deal with," he grumbled. "Why, he would not think the cracking of a pouce on his

finger nail of breaking the back of you—aye, or a dozen like you, if you should spoil the ring-grip of the King's bandolier, which is to hold up his royal sword."

"Strike," said I, "and hold your tongue. Ye tempted me to it by your mocks. That ye well know. Now I will make good my word!"

And with that I took the small moulding hammer in hand—one indeed which I knew very well, and getting the colour of the metal right to my mind, I held it ready for the striker on the beak of the anvil. But he, being afraid in his soul (perhaps in his body also) struck ill. So that, with words contumelious, I bade him forthwith go sweep the shoeing rank, as being all he was good for, and gave the hammer to his brother. He, seeing his elder's fall, did well enough—and afterwards better than well. So I thrust in and took out, tempered and arrosed, as I had seen them do in France, not making a plain ring (which indeed in Scotland was thought a good enough piece of work) but all in facets and dimples, cunningly set, and each exactly of the same size, like the cutting of a Venice glass.

And the lads stood and watched, saying no word after they had seen me once at it.

So intent were we on the finishing that when I had at last given the master stroke and laid the bandolier ring aside to cool, no one of us had noticed that a certain huge man, who walked lightly on tiptoe, had been observing us from the doorway.

"St. Bride," he cried, "if that be not my son Larry's stroke, may my steel never do more than cut withes to make baskets withal!"

And with that he walked up to me, and, putting forth his hand, he took off the squire's cap which I had pulled low over mine eyes, and, in spite of the walnut juice which I had used to tan my collegiate blanching, he knew me at once.

"Faith, Larry," he cried, "a rare good smith was spoiled in thee to make a bad Mess John! But what will thy mother say, lad? Art run off from thine abbacy?"

"Nay," said I, "the archbishop and my Lord of Dun-

keld both know my reasons. Fear not, father. I have never been a monk at heart any more than thyself, and now I have come to follow my star—glad as one who hath been over-long in the jingle-jangle of bells, the murmuring of prayers and the scent of the incense, for all which he had little mind, to escape to the tented field and his King's service!"

"What," cried Malise McKim, "are you then with us in this matter? Why, Larry lad, I thought within me that you would have been even as Sholto—he who commands over yonder."

And he pointed with his hand in the direction of Thrieve.

"Nay," I answered, "I am with you heart and soul!"

"But somehow," he said, rubbing his brow in some perplexity, "it was borne in upon me that there was in your heart a liking—more than a liking indeed (St. Bride, that an old man should speak of love and the follies of youth at this time of day!) for the little Lady Margaret yonder—the Earl James's wife!"

"Well," I answered him, "and what of that, my father?"

"Why," said he, still perplexed, for he was of a nature essentially simple and no little moidered in his head by his troubles, "then I would have thought that you would have gone to her and not to her enemies!"

"By what name did you call the lady just now, my father?"

"Why—why——," he seached about, "what should I call her, and were it not the Lady Margaret—Earl James's well-favoured, ill-fortuned wife?"

"And think you, father," I made him answer (for with Malise McKim it was best to use plain words), "that I would love the Lady Margaret the less, if she were, by chance, my Lord Earl's *widow* instead of my Lord Earl's wife?"

"U—m—m—m!" he said, slowly taking it in. Then he shook his head gravely.

"Such thoughts are not for blacksmith's sons," he grumbled in his throat, "but I will admit that ye are

worthy to be a deacon among hammermen! Ye have noways forgotten your trade, Larry, my lad!"

Then my brothers crowded about me, welcoming me, and asking pardon for their rough words.

"Out o' that," cried Malise, raising his hand, "go forge pike points, Corra. And you, Herries McKim, come hither, lift this ring and see how the metal is run in the direction of the strength. Ye alone are fit for something better than to clink plough-shares. But as for the rest of you—Dun, Roger, and Malise, get the other forges a-going—for there is work before us other than the making of springes to take coneys. And now, son Laurence, let us talk!"

CHAPTER XXXVII

WHOM GOD HATH TOUCHED

NEVER was Scottish siege so picturesque as this, all in the broad summer weather—the wide pleasant Strath of Dee glowing under the August sun, and the knights of the King's court riding forth every morning decked as to a tourney.

Nevertheless day followed day, and Malise fretted in his smithy, or used words in the broadest Galloway to the King himself—which, had they been understood of the monarch, might have damaged the good intent there was between King and smith. For they were both fiery by nature, and Malise cared just as little for what James Stewart thought as James Stewart did for what was the opinion of his new ally and master armourer.

But as for the effect of all they let loose upon the castle, the great bolts that were shot from the slings and catapults, the crackings of the new powder engines, and the firing of tow-headed arrows, sent blazing across the river, the besiegers might all just as well have blown their noses or sneezed once or twice in the direction of Thrieve for all the progress they made in the taking of it.

For Sholto, having had his times to make ready, had used them as none knew better than he how to do. He had fortified the whole area of the island with a wall, adding at the weaker places one wall behind another, and leaving a trench between, which at pleasure he could fill with water. More than that, all the ground opposite, on the other side of the river of Dee, had been cleared of cover and made bare as the palm of one's hand. So that at any moment, Sholto holding the short inner lines, and having the breadth of the water of Dee on all sides of him, could, by drawing his men together, stop any rush that was made closer to the water's side. So that the

defenders, firing from perfect cover, and with rests for their bronze culverins and little iron fusils, did infinite damage to the King's men without receiving so much as a single scratch themselves.

The King, following the advice of his chief nobles, was all for the slow advancement of the works by parallels and cross trenches to the waterside—and then, a dash through and a rush with ladders for the escalade!

But when my father heard this he was very angry, or, rather in a state betwixt laughter and anger.

"Why, let them," he cried (and you might have heard him on Cairnsmore), "let them gather all the bairns from the burgh schools of Scotland, all the lads the monks are teaching to put frocks about their hurdies, also all the cow-herds and all the swine-herds and all the goose-herds. For these are exceedingly expert in the use of the 'billit-gun,' that deadly weapon made of the bark of the bore-tree. Then with wads of tow, well chewed, let them practise upon the fortress of Thrieve! After that, like Jericho, the walls thereof may have a better chance of falling down. But as to this folly of the King's, there are no words which he will understand to tell him how foolish it is! Nevertheless, I will try. But, ah—if I could speak to him in the Gallowa'! Then he wad think but little o' himsel'!"

So Malise McKim went to the King.

It was, they say, a stormy time. For the King, a man of wrath from his youth up, could listen peaceably to no one. And as for Malise, my father—well, by this time the world kens Malise the Smith even better than James of the Fiery Face.

"I tell you, King of Scots," said Malise, clasping his hands tightly about the axe-pike he had been in act to make,—broad-bladed and beaked like a falcon,—"I tell you plainly that you may take up your tents and kitchen cullenders, remove your blazons and shields hung on spear shafts. Stands Thrieve ever a whit the less staunch for these? Months you have been here, and never the nearer by a yard. Also James of Douglas is on foot again! My son Herries, who hath the long sight,

saw him yesterday (no further gone) directing the archers to mark down your cannoneers upon the brae opposite the ford to the south, and in ten minutes there was not a man upright upon his legs among the little pivot guns, also the oxen that drew them were all dead too."

"Good, my master armourer," said the King, "there is matter in what you say, as well as some insolence, which for this time I pardon in you seeing whom ye have been serving all your life——!"

"Bide there, King James," cried Malise. "I have, it is true, a death quarrel with the man yonder—James of Douglas. But I was born under another Douglas—aye, in the year of Otterburn—he at whose funeral they led Percy captive. Under six Earls have I served. Good men and true men were they all—bucklers to their King, barriers against England. These have I served all my life, and now at the end this man hath cut me off from mine own loyalty as with a deadly blow! But, hark ye, King of Scots, my quarrel is with the *man* and not with the House of Douglas, though in my rage I may have said other of it. Nevertheless, I will aid you to bring yonder castle to the ground, and the man in it to the rope's-end or the edge of the sword for that which he hath wrought to me and mine. Almost at Arkinholm my right arm had saved you the trouble, but someone—I remember not well who—came between me and my vengeance!"

The old smith drew his hand slowly over his face, as if to clear his brain from some encompassing cloud—possibly the same reek of hate and vengeance which had so nearly turned another brain—as I read in the chronicle which hath been written by the Lady Margaret herself.

There was—I saw it not always, but chiefly when he sat brooding and thinking over his wrongs—a certain glowing madness or capacity for madness in my father, ordinarily covered up, indeed, but ready to break forth at the least mention of the name of James Douglas. As to his daughter, it was otherwise. For he would start up suddenly from his chair, or perhaps from a day-dream

on a cool hearth in the smithy, his back against the wall and his head deep sunk in his beard.

"Where is Magdalen?" was ever his cry; "good wife, where is our Magdalen? I bid you tell me! 'Tis some time since she went out. She bides over late on the hills!"

But there was none to answer as to where Magdalen might be found.

Meanwhile, all unwitting of this, the King and his suite stood watching. James Stewart, having a certain curious sympathy for the sorrow of the smith, quieted those behind him with a turn of the hand—the which, perhaps because it was the same that had treacherously slain his best friend and greatest subject, was not to be regarded without a certain awe.

"Why, Master Armourer," said the King more gently, "'tis very well in a proven man of war like Malise of Carlinwark and Mollance to commend us young men to return to our wives' petticoat tails and the surcots and pearled veils of our sweethearts. He hath done his day's darg. Six great lords hath he served—better, perhaps, than they served the crown——!"

At this Malise interrupted once more.

"Yet, did not your gran'ther, young man, bestow one of his daughters upon an Earl Douglas, and never thought himself or her the worse? Nay, by what other means doth the crown of the Bruces sit upon your own head, James Stewart, an the first o' your race had not fand it pinned to the bolsters of a bride-bed?"

The King frowned and then laughed.

"True," he said, "true indeed——! And so did we all come from Eve the wife of a gardener, who had never a bolster at all, nor pillow whereon to lay her head. Yet for the life of me, Master Armourer, I cannot see that such talk as thine brings down the walls of Thrieve any faster than our poor arbalasts and bombards!"

Before answering, the smith passed his hand across his brow as if to clear his mind. In these latter days this had become a fashion with him. He seemed to get bogged in his own words, and then after a while to return

with a sudden start to the gloomy vengeance to which he had vowed his days.

"Give me till to-morrow, my Lord the King," he said with more gentleness, "I have somewhat in my head here if only I can disentangle it. Ravelled it is, and knotted, but it will lead us somewhither. But first I would speak with my seven sons—nay, he added quickly, correcting himself, with six only—Sholto, the best of all, is over yonder! Yet," he added, "it is strange, I have tried and I cannot curse Sholto!"

He turned gently about, a milder mood being upon him.

"Your Majesty and gentlemen," he said, "I pray your pardon if one to whom God has left more brawn than brain, more weight than wit, more choler than courtesy, hath used words to hurt your gentrice. It was far from his intent. But by long usage, old Malise McKim is grown rough as his own smith's apron. Yet, if he can hammer out the thought that is in his head, yon high tower of Thrieve shall fall! And, if God leave strength to this right arm and enough good hemp within the realm of the Scots, James Douglas shall die a dog's death—for what he hath done—for what he hath done—*what was it that he did?* I forget, gentlemen! Truly, I forget. But it was something he shall die for—yes, die for! I am an old man, and everything goes from me. But to-morrow we McKims shall have this thought of mine hammered out and welded and tempered—ready to be put before Your Majesty. By the head of my little wench Magdalen, it shall be so! She was so beautiful, gentlemen, and innocent—and sat long upon my knees with her arms about my neck. But she is dead, gentlemen. She is dead, and the angels took her. I am an old man, a very old man, gentlemen all—I pray you forgive me!"

And saluting with his bonnet brought as low as the knee in the palm of his right hand, which was the courteous fashion of the ancient time, Malise of the Strong Thews, my good father, withdrew him, his great hand upon the shoulder of Herries, his son, not for support, but rather as one might walk with a staff.

And they say that the King softly laid his finger on

his own brow, saying, "Be gentle in speech with him, my lords. God hath touched the old man, or his trouble of mind, mayhap. He is strong as Samson. His bodily strength is not abated. Only at times, as ye see, there is a lack. Therefore, provoke him not. For whoso doth, it is at his own peril. His wife shall be a widow, his soul go to its own place, and that without benefit of clergy—of which, to my ripe knowledge the feck of you stand in sore need!"

CHAPTER XXXVIII

A PRINCE AMONG HAMMERMEN

In the smithy of the Three Thorns, Malise McKim drew his sons together. It was the morning after his interview with the King, very early. All night the old man had walked about by the lochside and I had kept him in sight till the dawning of the day. The sky of midnight had been clear with faint pearl-grey clouds, high and rare in the zenith. The loch gleamed at our feet like half-polished steel, flat and without ripple to the dark woods of Gelston. Meantime, my mother, Dame Barbara—her hair, that had been raven black with scarce a grey hair, now flaxen white—watched stealthily from the cottage door listening to the the steadfast *tramp-tramp* of her husband's feet along the narrow shingle and over the green knolls. She, too, had followed the camp, and had arrived at the Three Thorns the third day after the pitching of the tents. She spoke nothing of Magdalen, and seemed altogether occupied in noting the changes in Malise McKim.

During the night his wife had only been prevented from following him by my urgent entreaties and the repeated assurance that I was always behind him, ready to prevent anything desperate which might suggest itself to his troubled brain.

So I stole through the wood a little above him, silent as a moon shadow drifting over the hills. But though my father muttered much to himself and drove his great piked shepherd's crook deep into the clattering shingle of the little lakeside beaches, he did himself no harm—nor, I think, dreamed of it.

In the later morning, when the light had begun to spread upwards from the east he caught sight of Corra (who for a while had come to replace me) creeping

through some underbrush, rather clumsily, let it be said. He was upon him in a moment, with his staff upraised. "Dare you spy upon me, spawn of evil?" he cried. "I will e'en break thy back for thee with my clickie!"

And he would have done it, too, had it not been that I ran upon them from the cottage door, with my mother behind me, and each of us seized an arm.

"Let Corra be," she cried, "Malise, my man, do you not understand? We were in a fever about you—the lad did no more than he was bid!"

He stood leaning upon his staff, his chin upon the crook. "What might ye have been afraid of?" he queried slowly and gravely, "that I would do myself an injury?"

He turned about and pointed over the trees upon the ridge, ink-black against the brightening west.

"Do myself an injury?" he said, with a laugh which I loved not to hear; "nay, be at rest—*not till my work is done!*"

Then to his wife, our mother, he said: "Go thy ways, goodwife. Make the lads porridge and stir them weel. Let a driblet or two of meal slip between thy fingers. For the lumps in a bowl of porridge are the strength thereof. They make the bones of men. Now I would speak to the lads—yea, while there is time and the clearness of the morning in my head."

And with that he led the way to the smithy.

Eastward, day was just beginning to break across the little group of huts at the end of King Edward's Causeway, that ancient paved road which he made through the moss of Cuill and across the shallows of Carlinwark. My father began to speak.

"Over yonder," he said, jerking his thumb behind his shoulder towards the camp of the King, "there be a many fine gentlemen and well-attired lords, and, chief of all, his Majesty of the Fiery Face, Bloody Hand, and—brain of a poll parrot—to whom, in the meantime, I wish long life and much success! Lads, I serve him and them till the time appointed—then I serve no more!"

Then he laughed again; but this time silently and to himself.

"But that which we wait for we must work for. And it is not in the possible of siccan grand lads, with their changes of apparel three times a day, their pennons and gonfalons going before, to bring doon yon auld prood castle o' Thrieve, fenced aboot wi' Dee Water, drumly after flood, or crystal-clear after spate!

"Na, nor is there a man in a' the hosts of the King, frae the Bennan to Carlinwark Hill, that can match Sholto McKim, my son and your brither. Nevertheless, it is laid upon me that yonder castle must fall. And as to that I have a thought here!"

He paused a long while after this, so that the sun, throwing a sudden beam in at the smiddy door, caused the shadow of an anvil, with a forehammer leaning against it, to start across the floor of beaten earth and iron filings.

"Lads," he said, "we maun make a cannon, like to nane that hath heretofore been upon the earth—a bombard that shall throw a great ball, such as no man can lift, miles and miles across land and water!"

The lads (who, for all their being called "boys," "lads," and so forth, were all well over their twenty-first year) looked at one another with sudden glances, full of meaning, which I could interpret right well. They thought that the want in the mind had come upon him once again. But I knew better.

"Yes, my father," I answered him, "I have heard of such as being forged in the realm of Germany. They are made of great gauds of iron, each separately forged, welded together, bound about with iron bands, and finally compacted with wedges thrust within the rings!"

"Of what size are these German cannon?" demanded Malise the smith.

"Of the greatness that a man may knit his fingers and thrust his hand with!" I answered.

My father rose and took a turn within the narrow limits of the smithy, which he did of habitude, turning and walking, avoiding all the time, without any observance, the pieces of armour and stands of arms scattered about. For, though he was in all ways a man so great

in stature and thickness, he moved lightly as a cat, and that even to his latest days.

"Laurence, you say well," he answered, "but what is an engine like that? Thrieve Castle is no iron broth-pot, nor a basin of red baked clay to be battered with cobble stones over Dee Water. The cannon we shall fashion must be of a greatness so that twelve strong horses shall have hard work to drag it over a made road. And instead of a man's fist, or even his joined neives, he shall be able to thrust his whole body therein with his sark upon his back and his hose on his feet!"

The lads looked on in silent amazement. Malise turned to them.

"Aye, aye, we McKims shall do it! Seven great forge fires shall there be on the shore of the Carlinwark—to each of us one. With our arms shall we work at the metal, but the King's men shall make a high fence—John Johnstone the joiner and his loons clacking and hammering nails, so that all shall keep their distance—aye, even the King's own majesty—till the work be finished and complete. Also the camp followers shall bring us fuel, and we will work till we die—or the work be done!"

"But—but—but—!" began the lads, "we have never made or even seen any powder guns greater than these culverins of bronze——"

Malise McKim siezed a hammer, and swung it in his hand.

"Hear ye, Corra, Dun, Herries, and the rest," he shouted, "do as I bid you!—or by St. Bride, I will make a row of herring heads of you nailed against the smiddy wa'! Have I spent my labour in vain—in the begetting of windle-staws, in rearing a cleckan of peeping pullets, fit only to pick corn-seed about a barn-door? Am I not the Master Smith? Am I not Malise McKim? And shall a crew of loons, scarce breeched and scantily bearded, dare to crake and craw at me when I set them their tasks and piece-work? To your day's darg like good hammermen! Strike hard! Say naught! Laurence and I will to the King!"

And to the King he went.

It was not far. Upon the ridge of Carlinwark, to the right, behind the great beech tree which broke the westerly wind from the cottage of the Three Thorns, rose the royal pavilion, with the Lion of Scotland in front. Those of his chief lords, Angus, Morton, Crichton, Huntley, with their several ensigns, were disposed irregularly about.

James of the Fiery Face was early astir. Indeed, so far as I ken, none of the Stewarts were long liers abed. He met us in the doorway of his tent, and at once bade all men go forth from him, save Crichton only.

This last proved to be a little wizened cunning man with the visage of a monkey, but he looked at us with a pair of the brightest eyes that ever were seen in the realm of Scotland.

At the sight of him and the King's ardent commendation of his qualities, I could see the dull red fires glow up in my father's eyes.

"A cup of wine with you, Malise," said the King, "and you, young slip of lear, wha for your misdeeds, wants a name to your tail—what do you with our Master Armourer?"

"What do you with *that?*" said my father, somewhat truculently and a great deal insolently, pointing his finger at Crichton, who sat at a table turning over some papers diligently.

"Why, man, he is in some sort a head-piece to me," "said the King, humouring the old man; "'tis well kenned that mine own is no great things!"

"And even so is this youth mine," answered my father swiftly, "though," he added more slowly, "I do admit he is a master craftsman also, having studied the art of iron in France and other countries."

For I had bound over my fathers and brothers not to reveal who I was.

The King called a pantler out of the household train, and bade him fetch a flagon of wine, of which he poured out a full cup.

But Malise put it away from him.

"Give such like to the young," he said. "I will drink no wine and eat only such meat as is necessary for the sustaining of my body till the castle yonder is in our hands."

"And have you gotten that troublesome thought safely out of your head, ingoted, and laid on anvil, eh, Master Smith?" demanded the King, smiling.

"Ye shall hear, King James Stewart!" he answered. "'Tis ingoted, barred, and ready for the fire and hammer-stroke. Listen! I have much good iron in the shed of the smithy under the trees. I expected that it would serve my lifetime. In the town of Kirkcudbright there is much more. Only, I pray you, give us men to build an enclosure about our forge-hearth, for we would not be fashed in our labour."

"And what," said the King, "is this your labour of which you speak?"

"King James," said the smith, "I have promised to serve you and to be your man till the Castle of Thrieve fall and the lord thereof comes by his deserts. I will make you a cannon greater than any in the world. This young man, having travelled far and near, hath seen the like—only in little—in the German camps in the Low Countries! But I will make a cannon which shall send a ball from where we stand to the battering down of yon high towers of Thrieve—aye, farther an ye will——"

"Malise, Malise," said the King reproachfully, "I had expected more and better than this mad ploy. The thing is clean impossible. The like was never seen in this realm or in any other."

My father erected himself, squaring his great shoulders till they seemed almost to reach the breadth of the pavilion.

"King of Scots," he said with solemnity, "you are a man, I am a man. Your name is James Stewart, mine Malise McKim! Hath ye seen or heard aught to gar ye think your royal word better than the word of Malise the smith of Carlinwark!"

"Methinks the comparison would lean somewhat heavily to your side of the balance, good Master Armourer!"

said the King good-humouredly. "Not at all times can a King keep his word. He hath those about him, like my excellent Chancellor at the table there, who will not let him!"

And I thought that a dry smile passed over the face of Crichton, who nevertheless continued to occupy himself with parchments and various writings. As for me, I was in an agony of fear lest my father should say something to the King about the safe conduct which he had given, writ with his own hand, signed with his name and seal, to William of Douglas, when he brought him to Stirling to meet his death. But Malise the smith was appeased by King James's answer, and, after brooding a little, laid the whole plan and design of the great cannon before him.

"I have here at the Carlinwark six sons," he said in conclusion, "and that we will forge you the cannon I put their heads and mine own in the balance. Let your headsman sharpen his blade for us if we fail——!"

"And if you succeed?" asked Crichton, looking up with a sudden brightening of his countenance, "you seven will all need an earldom at least. It is the fashion nowadays!"

"Nay——," answered Malise McKim slowly, "not an earldom, nor yet a chancellorship, my lord of Crichton —nor any reward in lands or siller. But only—five minutes alone with James Douglas!"

"That you shall have and welcome!" said the King. "But why do you not ask for the life of your son who is in rebellion?"

"That will I not," said Malise McKim. "I have told you before, King of Scots, the young man serves not James Douglas but the Lady Margaret, his true mistress. He will serve you as well. Had he been in rebellion, would he have been lacking at Arkinholm?"

"Malise," cried the King, laughing, "I had not thought you so subtle in thy reasons. This lad in black must have quickened thee, as Crichton doth my own sluggish harnpan. But all the same, may the saints confound that Sholto of thine—rebel or no rebel—traitor or loyal sub-

ject—I wot well that he is giving us a huge deal of trouble in the midst of this wild Galloway. And, spite of thy cannon, no man yet sees how it will end!"

. . . . .

So that very night on the shore of Carlinwark seven great forges were set up. In the woods of Buittle and Borgue men black to the eye-holes made charcoal for the fires that burned night and day. And we seven McKims shut ourselves out from the world—by day in a hot and panting purgatory of burning sun and blowing fires. At night it was a little better. The deep glow of the forges was reflected on the still waters of the loch, and the clang of the forehammers was heard afar. Mostly we seven were stripped and blackened to the waist with coal and grime, and I warrant well that mine own almoner at Sweetheart Abbey would not have known his sometime abbot had he met him these days 'twixt vespers and prime.

Above on the slope, it was the nightly amusement of the soldiers, and even of many young scions of the nobility, to cluster along the ridge and look down upon us at our travail—now black against the firelight, anon our faces and swart naked limbs lit up with the leaping flames. Demons of the nether pit could have looked little otherwise, as, escaping for a moment, we ran to the white cottage, demanding drink from our mother, who, on her part, poor woman, slept little, watching my father, and, like him, wearing herself out. But she for love even as he for hate.

So the great iron gauds to make the body of the bombard were forged in such a turmoil as never before or since have mine eyes beheld, or my ears been deaved withal. We began to put the great cannon together, and not till then did the mighty proportions of the monster appear, taking shape dimly through the swelter.

Then came a period of yet fiercer excitement. So long as we were merely working at the forging of the bars, each man had to heat and hammer by himself, or, at most, with only one associate. But when at last the monster began to take actual shape, and we saw before us the

mighty maw which should soon begin to vomit destruction, and the vast of the cavern which would hold (as my father had truly said) the body of a man, we could scarce stay ourselves from shouting aloud.

"Bide," said my father grimly. "There is the pick and flower of the work yet to do. The iron rings are yet to be shrunk upon her, and many a stiff back and many a wet-wringing brow shall ye hae afore that be through with, lads of mine!"

I mind the night yet when the last band was fitted. It chanced that, without our observing it, the wood and charcoal had gotten dangerously near to the bottom of the pile.

Also, though my father knew it not (and we dared not tell him), the Borgue men had not arrived with fresh loads—being more than two days behind, drinking of acquavit at some dyke-back belike, after their kind. And so when the master band of all was to be put about the cavernous breech, where the force of the powder would spend itself most fiercely—lo! the fires were in danger of falling low!

Then my father, who throughout had scarce spoken at all, save only to give his orders, went like a man demented, and bade pull down the ancient smithy of Carlinwark, and burn the beams for fuel. And as he stood there with naught upon him save the great leathern apron twisted about his middle to serve for a breech-clout, black from top to toe with the forge sweat and charcoal grime, I doubt if even James Stewart would have hesitated about obeying him, if he had bidden tear down and burn Holyrood House itself.

At any rate we who underlay his wrath did not lose a moment, and we were a-tearing an' a-scrambling at the roof before the words were well out of his mouth. Yet for all I could not help thinking how much happier I was, astride upon one beam and hacking at another, than ever I had been sitting in my chair in the abbey of Sweetheart with the chaunted psalms and the incense going up about me in clouds of holy scent and sound.

Well, we fetched it down with a run, and clumsy

"IT WAS THE NIGHTLY AMUSEMENT OF THE SOLDIERS . . . TO CLUSTER ALONG THE RIDGE AND LOOK DOWN UPON US"

Corra, tramping bullock-like along the rigging, well-nigh broke his neck by falling through. So we brought the rafters, tinder dry and brown with many generations of smithy fires, and thrust them into the furnace.

"More and more!" shouted my father, lifting and feeding as if the house beams had been but so much kitchen firewood.

"He will have the cottage itself about our heads in another moment," quoth my mother. "Laurence, go get him wood or he will tear down the house of the Three Thorns as he hath done to the smiddy. And even when I am deep under sod, I want to think o' the gable of the bonny house, where we two used to sit and talk, cleeked close on the bench he made, the first year we were marriet! Find him wood, Laurence. Bring it to him! Haste ye, Laurence, haste ye!"

So I gat hold of Herries and a strong country lad or two from without the barriers, and tore down the fences which the King's carpenters had put up. There was a great crowd of the curious all about. Then when I made my choice of helpers they pressed forward. But I bade them go back at the peril of their lives, for that Malise McKim would crack a man's skull that night, as it were an egg-shell, if he found him where he had no business to be.

And one behind them, wrapped in a great cloak, cried out for all to stand back and that he would help us himself. Which, being evidently of some authority among them, he did, tearing down the boards and pales of the enclosure and carrying them on his back to the door of the cannon shed, but no further.

"I have desire to look once," he said, when at last we had finished. "Let that be my reward!"

So I told him to keep well behind Herries, and he looked within. It was indeed a ferlie worth seeing that he saw—Malise the great smith leaping and striking with six attendant demons all pulling and thrusting, and, as it seemed, passing their bodies through the fires of hell ten times in a minute. The sparks flew great as crown pieces. The flames danced upward in coils and spikes.

And in the background the great black monster stood waiting her last neck-band.

"Here, Corra—Herries! All is ready!" shouted my father. "Come, Laurence, and the rest of you—seven McKims, all working as one, to avenge the shame of our house! Would to God there had been eight!"

He called us seven, and spoke to me as if I had been there.

And lo! when I looked, with eyes dazzled by the light, it is true, I could count seven McKims in the forge, where, wanting me, there should only have been six.

"Laurence, Laurence, strike with me, lad, for the last welding!" cried my father, evidently believing that I was by his side.

I could not understand it. Nevertheless, I had perforce to shuffle our helper away to the gap in the fence out of my father's eye-shot, as well as to get back to do my part. But as we reached the place a crowd of curious had entered, and stood gaping and gazing, whom our helper hotly ordered back.

But one, being of the insolent, ignorant sort, common in camps, called out, "Well for you, crane's neck, hook-nose —*you* have seen! We saw you peep within. We will not go back, nor take our orders from you? Who are you to make good soldiers of my Lord Angus jump hither and thither at your orders, and tumble somersaults like puppy dogs?"

"That I will show you!" said the man, and dropped his cloak. *And it was the King!*

Then every man gat him behind his neighbour, all trying to appear as if they had come out solely to gaze upon the stars. At another time I would have laughed, but then I had other most unhumorous business to my hand.

"Provost Marshal," cried the King, "take that man and make him discover how easy it is to jump hither and thither—aye, and for a good soldier of my Lord Angus's to tumble somersaults like a puppy dog!"

And so, with red flame and clangour infinite, the great cannon was forged. It is the same which is called Mons.

or Mollance Meg, after my father's landed property, and stands in the Castle of Edinburgh to this day to witness if I lie.

. . . . .

The End of the Portion of History writ by the Young Man in Black.

CHAPTER XXXIX

WHEREIN MARGARET DOUGLAS AGAIN TAKES UP THE TALE—SHOLTO ALSO IS A M'KIM

AND in the meantime how passed the days and weeks and months on the high bastions and in the higher keep of Thrieve?

I will try to tell.

Every morn Maud and I went up to the roof to see the muster of the King's troops, which was like a pageant. There were trumpets that blew, and banners that waved, and knights and horses all covered with cloth of red and gold—a gallant sight, and one which Maud and I (being as much children as any) were never tired of watching, so long, that is, as Sholto assured us that there was no danger.

At times James Douglas would come up to the roof battlements; but, like one outcasted and desolate, he would abide in a place by himself, speaking with none, or only with the officers and soldiery of the garrison. Sometimes one of the children would run to take his hand and talk, of which he seemed glad.

When he met Sholto, the Captain of the Guard of Thrieve saluted gravely, and stood listening. Then, if the Earl put a question, Sholto answered it in so many words; but if not, he would salute again, and betake himself to the outposts or to the dungeon of Archibald the Grim, which, with purposes of his own, he was wholly refitting, strengthening even the walls, doubling the thickness of the top in solid stone and lime, and providing for view and air by narrow slits, through which one could scarce thrust one's hand edgewise.

One day to try him, I asked Sholto if he meant to shut up the King of Scots in Archibald the Grim.

"Nay," he answered me at once; "but some few things far more precious!"

One day, being in my ancient south-looking chamber, of which the fear had gradually grown away (though I admit that even then I liked not to sleep there), I heard the noise of voices beneath, on the balcony. The window was open and I seated idly with my hands in my lap. I could not help but hear.

. . . . . .

The men proved to be Sholto McKim and James Douglas, my husband, who spoke on the platform of stone beneath my windows.

"What think you, Sir Sholto," said the Earl, "shall we hold it or no? They make no progress. Their trumpetings, their shooting of arrow flights, their cracking of pop-guns—what are these as against the solid walls of Thrieve and the strong virgin defences of the isle?"

For an instant Sholto did not answer, and I could clearly hear the soothing *hush* of the Dee over its shallows at the bridge-end. Then he spoke.

"My lord," he said, "we have seen, as you say, many useless marches and counter-marches! We have repelled feints of attack, and harkened to many summonses to surrender in the name of our Lord the King. Yet no man in the garrison is grievously hurt, while those of us who have been smitten owe their wounds mostly to their own recklessness. But there is one thing concerning which my mind is not easy."

"And that?" said the Earl, idly chipping little bits of the plaster and skimming them over the wall.

"It is," said Sholto, "that in all these things we see naught of Malise McKim, my father, nor yet of his sons, my brothers!"

"Oh, there is small need to concern oneself with that," said the Earl, "they have gone afield to raise more troops. Or mayhap, there lies a sorrow upon their minds to help in breaking down that which they have built up—I mean because the McKims have been Master Armourers at Thrieve, in a manner of speaking, since the world began."

Sholto gazed long at James Douglas. I could not

see his face, but I knew well the way he would look. About this time his master was a constant surprise to him —his unconscious brutality of selfishness, the crassness of his judgment in all that concerned others—in especial, the fatal lightness of his mind, habiting a body so strong and so fair, joined to a nature so truly courageous as between man and man, yet so self-seeking and contracted towards women and God! All this joined in one person, might well make Sholto McKim marvel. True, I knew James Douglas over well. I had long gotten over my wondering.

"You think that my father will come back to you—that after a time he will forgive—let all be as it was?" Sholto stammered, scarce knowing what to say.

James Douglas moved uneasily, I knew exactly how. I could feel him, though see him I could not.

"No, not that," he said; "so much no man could expect. But some token of forgiving—some kindly remembrance, some returning loyalty toward the House his fathers served—so much seems to me by no means unreasonable!"

Sholto nodded, with what of grim countenance I could guess. Even by leaning out I could see no more than the peak of the plain steel cap in which he made his rounds.

"No, it is not impossible," he said slowly. "There is however, one condition."

"And what might that condition be?" cried James Douglas. (As he spoke I could hear the returning hope in his voice. It hurt him that men should not approve him.)

"That he should see One Man lie dead!"

I felt the question tremble on James Douglas's lips. But it was not put. The prophet's "Thou art the man!" was not an answer which he desired to hear from the lips of his truth-speaking Captain of the Guard.

Abruptly he turned on his heel and walked away. Sholto McKim was left behind, leaning one elbow on the stone baluster and gazing pensively across the water-meadows towards the ridge of Carlinwark, where,

through the pale purple of the gloaming, certain red bursts of flame sent a ruddy "skarrow" vibrating aloft to the lower clouds.

Long and carefully Sholto watched. The night grew rapidly darker—chiller also. The light in the east waxed more and more lurid. There came a noise of shouting on the breeze.

"That is my father!" said Sholto aloud, "I must go and see what he is about!"

All the same he went his rounds with a little more than his usual care. Then he came up by the turret stairs, kissed the babes who were asleep in their cots, sat a while by Marcelle's trundle-bed to talk over the events of the day as was his wont—how a new blazon had been seen in front of a troop which rode past the castle on the Balmaghie shore—how a certain bullock in the byres, Red Jock by name, had gotten a narrow wound in his heel, which she had helped to bind, in spite of the unthankful and ill-behaved kicking and plunging of the patient.

Then descending, Sholto said a quiet courtly word to me in the great hall, kissed Maud his wife, and (here all we knew at the time finishes) dressed himself in countryman's garb, crossed the Dee Water to the southward, where, among the marshes the enemy's watch-huts were few and ill-tended—only some few folk of Solway Moss abiding there, and even they having mostly removed themselves over to the Carlinwark on the chance of picking the King's supper bones, and getting a peep at the works of Malise the Smith over the palisades of the Three Thorns.

So Sholto, to whom all the bogs and marshes, with their green "quaas" slimy and mysterious, their humpy islands of crumbling peat, their blind leads of ink-black water, stagnant and oily—were familiar, who knew them as a man that rises in the night knows his way back to his bed—found little difficulty in outwitting and outstripping the guards to the south of the Isle of Thrieve. An arrow whistled in his wake once or twice. A cur barked as he crossed its wind within a few yards of a Lochar

man's post, striding onward, contemptuous of such soldiering. Brief, in less than an hour, Sholto, his face blackened with grime which he knew where to seek on the rubbish heaps of the old smithy, stood among the crowd outside the barriers, elbowing and cursing with the best, while they watched the roaring of the flames and marvelled at the fierce pulling down of the ancient smithy for the sake of the beams.

But the shed over the great cannon balked his curiosity through every crevice of which the flames seemed to dart from an interior filled to bursting with the glow of red-hot metal and the clank of hammers.

"I am the Captain of Thrieve—I must see," growled Sholto. "I am a McKim—God's grace, see I will!"

And while the youths were still scrambling on the rigging of the smithy, and while the Young Man in Black (whose narrative has been entered before) was tearing at the palisades to keep up the fire, Sholto McKim, unseen of any, stole along the dark waterside, and in a moment paused at the door of that Vulcan's cavern of noise and heat and flame. Awhile he stood, stricken dumb and motionless with amazement.

Then, seeing that certain of his brothers were a-missing, and that there needed someone to deal stroke-and-stroke about with his father, something suddenly pricked in his heart. He thought of James Douglas as he had never done before. He muttered, "'Fore God, am not I also a McKim! I will do my part!" And with that he rushed within, picked up a forehammer, and was at his ancient task, as of yore in the unroofed smithy a little lower down by the waterside of Carlinwark.

He it was of whom the Young Man in Black caught a glimpse ere he returned from hearing the King order his Provost Marshal to impress a respect for kingcraft upon the insolent back of that "good soldier of my Lord of Angus"—the which (the fellow being a Douglas fighting against the head of his house) I trust the Provost Marshal achieved in due time and with a stout right arm.

And long ere the morning light, Sholto McKim, with

full information as to what the castle of Thrieve might expect when the monster cannon was completed, lay stretched out sound asleep beside his Maud. Yet when she waked, with the thought of her ailing babes on her mind, her husband said nothing to her of his night adventures—nothing indeed to any of us. But from that time forth, the strengthening of the dungeon place, called Archibald the Grim, and the due provisioning of it with light and food and air, were pushed forward with tenfold speed.

And though I was the first to know of Sholto's night work, it was not till long afterwards that he told even me anything.

Nevertheless, from the cessation of the customary attacks upon the outworks of the Isle, from the drawing away of men for purposes to us unseen, there fell an uneasy consciousness upon Thrieve that something serious was impending. The men no longer sang behind the fortifications, but conferred in whispers. And every night you might see a group of them on the castle roof, eagerly looking towards the red flicker in the sky which told of some notable work to our disadvantage going on behind the hill of Carlinwark.

We know now what that work was. It was the making of the carriage for the huge cannon, called afterward Mons Meg's cradle, and the vast chariot whereon to drag her to a hill just beyond the fords of Glenlochar—a round hill called at that time the Byne of Camp Douglas because the shape of it was like an upturned basin—but afterwards, and to this day "Knockcannon," or the mount of the cannon.

At last one day we heard a great shouting and affray to the northward, and Sholto, looking forth, made out a long procession keeping well in the rear of the line of tents upon the Clairbrand heights. But they could by no possibility keep themselves hidden at the Fords of Lochar. For they were bound to cross that way, the water being deep above, and the castle too near and dangerous below. So that we on the topmost towers of Thrieve could see plainly, as it were, all the King's horses and all the King's

men, convoying, with pain and travail, what seemed a great long cask or barrel across the shallows of the Dee.

Then it was that Sholto spoke, but in few words.

"It behoves that we keep good watch," he said. "They have made a great cannon at Carlinwark. I have seen it with these eyes. It may well be that before it the walls of the castle will be as paper. But as yet no man knows whether the shot will strike us, or whether the piece may not burst at the first discharge. But be these things as they may, I have caused made a place of refuge in the dungeon, which no cannon shot, an it were three times as huge, could possibly break into. Thither, my Lady Margaret, you will retire with Maud and the babes when I give the word. But there is yet enough of time. Much remains for them to do, and of warning, ere the danger arrives, there will be enough and to spare. They are now on a hill, and cannot be hid."

"In any case I shall remain with you, Sholto!" said Maud Lindsay.

"You will obey your husband, wife!" retorted Sholto without heat.

At which Maud heaved a sigh, for she knew that she would indeed abide by the babes in obedience to her husband. He was, in any case, a difficult person to disobey, this same Sir Sholto McKim.

CHAPTER XL

ARCHIBALD THE GRIM

NEVERTHELESS Sholto kept a diligent watch on those things which needed to be done before the great cannon could fire its first shot. There were no iron or leaden bullets which would suffice to fill the maw of the ravening monster.

But Sholto found out by methods of his own that the quarrymen of the King were busy cutting balls of stone from the granite sides of the Bennan nigh to the dock of Ken, rolling them to the foot and afterwards transporting them by water to the hill called the Byne of Camp Douglas, where Mons Megs in her wooden jacket stood waiting a favourable day for beginning the battering of the nine-foot thick walls of Thrieve.

As for Earl James, he cared for none of these things. Thrieve was intact. That was enough for him. Every outwork and bastion stood as it had done at the beginning of the seige. The King had gained no ground. The winter was coming on fast. This talk of a great cannon —pshaw! Had he not seen a dozen such, and one good lance-thrust or a well-swung battering-ram was worth them all. To think that the strong walls of Thrieve, three yards of stone and lime, could crumble before a missile discharged from the Byne of Camp Douglas!—it was folly so crass that no man in his senses could possibly consider it! These, in brief, were the opinions of the Earl James.

Nor did Sholto argue with his master. He let him go where he listed, say and do the thing he desired. What he himself occupied his time with appeared curious. His absences were frequent, especially after the workmen had finished the thickening of the dungeon. Still in his countrymen's dress, he climbed the long wooded slopes of the Bennan to be present at the shaping of the

vast granite balls for the giantess. He knew when the powder waggons were to arrive from Edinburgh. On the other hand, he had gone, taking counsel with none, to Kirkcudbright and there arranged for a little coasting vessel to wait in the Dutchman's Lake at a place where embarkation would be easy "in case of need," as he said to the Earl upon his return.

At one time it was his intention to take us all one by one through the marshes and put us aboard that ship. But two things stood in the way of this.

Maud would not consent to be separated from any of the children, and the confinement to the castle during the long hot summer, the great amount of water stagnant in the ditches and defenses, as well as in the marshes to the south, had produced in Ulric and Baby David a sort of low lingering fever.

At this time Sholto could without much difficulty have passed the Earl through, but a kind of blind determination took hold of James—who, indeed, all through his life had been resolute in the wrong places. Flee to England he would not! In Thrieve he would abide! He had defied the King long. He would defy him altogether. To die—well, he was not afraid of death! Death came to every man. So far his star had not deserted him. So here he would abide and dree his weird, and so long as there was a hoof of nowt behind the Isle dyke or a flagon of Bordeaux in the castle cellar, James Douglas would be noways unhappy.

So in Thrieve we remained, watching with strange feelings the enemy's preparations for our destruction, and above all, we gazed fascinated at that ominous shape, like a hay-wain with a wine vat atop, pointing at us from the Byne of Camp Douglas.

Yet the thing was so little and so far. It seemed impossible, watching it in the still mornings from the ramparts of Thrieve, that yonder black dot, almost invisible, that framework of iron small as a child's toy, should be pointed at us for the purpose of bringing our castle to the ground and death to all of us who were there.

Nevertheless we waited with that curious chill stillness of indifference with which men and women of our nation face calamity which no care can evite.

It is as if they said, "Fate is upon us—who are we that we complain, alter, or amend?"

And such is mostly the spirit of the race of Galloway—not very grateful for prosperity, taking it as their right, rather. Neither greatly cast down by adversity. It is not their desert—still less their fault. Fate—Fate hath decreed the issues of Good or Ill. And so the true Pict of Galloway sits him down and is silent, not much dissatisfied with the Powers Above—still less (be it said) with himself.

. . . . .

The day in November when the great cannon was first fired remains very clear in my memory.

Nor is it likely that the impression will ever fade. See, I will try to call it up. It was what we call in Galloway "a sheep-wintering day"—that is, the kind of day on which the shepherds from the Merrick and the Rhinns of Kells would bring down the feck of their flocks to the lower pastures—leaving only old seasoned rams and "snaw-breaking" ewes to withstand the rigours of the hill storms.

To be more exact and explicatory to one who knows not our climate, the day was clear, mildly frosty, with a sun that looked down through a faint equal mist, granulated like grass long worn by the sea. There was a nip in the air, not snell, but with a grim threat of oncoming winter behind the pale sunshine of November.

About ten o' the clock we were all out on the balcony which looks to the north. The river was very still and flowed towards us without apparent motion. It did not reflect—there was, indeed, nothing for it to reflect, save that colourless canopy of haze.

Suddenly Sholto lifted his voice.

"All to shelter!" he cried. And gathering up the three younger children he carried them down into the deeps of Archibald the Grim—the dungeon which he had spent so much time in making cannon-proof for us.

Maud followed with the others, but I lingered a moment, curious. There was nothing to be seen upon the Byne of Camp Douglas—at least no more than the ordinary number of black dots, who were always bustling about like ants in a disturbed nest. If anything, these seemed to be at a somewhat greater distance than was usual from the dark muzzle of Mons Meg.

As I stood gazing there came from beneath the voice of Sholto McKim.

"My Lady Margaret, your place is waiting, and I am waiting! Come!"

"One moment only!" I cried, anxious to see.

"Not one!" he answered. "I command at Thrieve and I am responsible for your safety. Come!"

And I could not help smiling to myself, even at such a moment. For well I knew that Sir Sholto was quite capable, in the event of the least delay, of catching me up like one of the bairns and shutting me in Archibald the Grim with the low door locked behind me.

And, indeed, locked it was, and that upon the instant. And what a strange feeling to be shut up from all hopes of succour—there, in the deepest deeps of the castle. But Sholto had been thoughtful for us, knowing that we were but women, and of that curious tribe whose first mother cost mankind Paradise.

Perhaps, on the other hand, he had made those slits for light and air before he knew that the great piece was to be dragged from Carlinwark to the hill northward of Thrieve, called the Byne of Camp Douglas.

Be these things as they may, it is certain that I had no small pleasure and satisfaction in looking through a little guarded arrow-slot in the direction of the fatal hill. Behind me Maud was busied with the children, disposing them upon the beds and benches which Sholto had provided. A dim but sufficient glow from the narrow slots, mere lines of light penetrating from without, filled the interior of Archibald the Grim.

From a wooden stage attached to the wall hung a "cruisie" lamp, made of iron. The upper palm-shaped hollow was filled with oil, and carried a floating wick

of teased linen. This, however, we were ordered not to light without closing carefully all the apertures which gave to the north.

I was instantly at the fortunate arrow-slot. It was well-nigh on the level of the river, and over the low rampart in front only the utmost top of the Byne of Camp Douglas could be seen. The great black wine-tun in her cradle had been pushed clear of the covering shed, and behind and to either side there stood a compact crowd of black dots—doubtless curious spectators come out to see the proof of that which had been so long in the making.

Somehow I had upon me a feeling that Laurence was up there. As indeed he was, bringing all his mathematics to bear on the problem of how to point and elevate the mouth of the iron monster so that the shot might strike the centre of the castle of Thrieve.

Meantime, on the battlements of the highest tower, Sholto and James Douglas watched with interest and without the least fear the trial which might bring them death the next moment. For thus are some men made—some, not all.

An instant more—and a puff of white smoke appeared on the summit of the Byne, rapidly mounted and spread outward in the shape of a cabbage, the top being blown off into haze by the light wind.

Followed by an unutterable pause—of moments which seemed years—æons—eternities!

Then—*crash!* The castle was shaken to its foundations. The walls seemed to rock. We heard the thunder of a great explosion. Something high above us seemed to rip like torn cloth, and in front of our little arrow slit descended a rain of fragments of stone and the dust of lime, blown fine and powdery. The curious sulphury smell of a hammer stricken on blue whinstone pervaded everything.

For a time it appeared to us as if the whole castle had been destroyed. The keep itself seemed to have fallen upon our heads, almost crushed the solid stone roofing and tripled masonry of Archibald the Grim flat, like the

leaves of a book. Nevertheless Maud, quite unmoved, occupied herself in soothing little David. The twins, Cuthbert and Bride, scuffled for a place at the window, while, holding each of his brothers by a leg, sturdy Ulric complained even to tears between his tugs, "I wants to see—I wants to see!"

Then presently we heard the voice of James Douglas without the dungeon.

"Goes all well within?" he cried.

"All is well," answered Maud, starting quickly. "Where is Sholto?"

"He is safe and untouched," said the Earl, "but the castle has been breached in the midst of the first story, above your heads. Many have been hurt—some, I fear, killed outright! Sholto is caring for them. He bade me come hither to ask after your welfare!"

Then, I think, there was not one of us who did not know that the end of the siege could not be far off. This our castle impregnable had been breached with the very first ball of Mons Meg—what might not the second do? I looked forth at the hill and the little groups of moving dots upon it. Would it come a second time? Where would it strike! Whom would it slay? If the missile broke a way into the castle so easily through walls nine feet thick—would even Grim Archibald be safe—that mother—these little babes?

Even then, God be thanked! I had the grace not to think very much about myself. Indeed, wherefore should I? Life or death were but slight things to me, knowing what I knew, having drunken deep of the bitter without once fairly tasting the sweet.

But what was the strangest thing of all, there came no second shot that day. The deadly black vat on wheels was nowhere to be seen. All the men ran to and fro, looking more like ants than ever, over the smooth grey-green surface of the Byne—now and henceforth for ever to be called only "Knockcannon," the hill of the cannon.

What happened we knew not then. We heard afterwards at length. The great iron murderer had rushed

backwards with the recoil of the shot, almost killing Malise McKim, who had fired the piece after Laurence had levelled the muzzle to direct a ball of granite, the weight of a Carsphairn cow, upon Castle Thrieve. This same Laurence, seeing his father's danger, pulled him forcibly to the left. Whereupon Mons Meg charging backward with the force of a peck of powder in her belly, knocked a hole through the rear of her wooden shed, and, before any could stop her, had run down the gently sloping sides of the Byne, overturning in the marsh at the bottom—without, however, doing herself any considerable harm.

But it was obvious to the McKims, and especially to Laurence, the engineer of the family, that a strong backing of wood and earth must be built immediately upon the summit of the Byne, compacted with pales, in order to prevent a repetition of this performance after each shot.

So for several days we in Thrieve had rest; but all felt it was only the reprieve of the condemned criminal before execution. No power on earth could save us when once they gat the gun into position again. So Sholto, after all the wounded men had been removed and the dead buried at the farther end of the isle, permitted us to come forth once more to breathe the air.

It was a strange and memorable spectacle that awaited us when we mounted to the great hall of Thrieve, commonly so grave and peaceful, with its black oak furnishings and ancient tapestries. The window which had given upon the tranquil river, and through which I had looked so often, was now a huge, yawning gap, irregularly toothed, some of the blocks above hanging only by the strength of the shell lime in which they had been imbedded, and threatened every moment to descend into the gulf beneath. After effecting this havoc the great ball of Bennan granite had passed through a group of soldiers of the guard, who had been peering from the window, scattering and slaying on its way; then it had broken through the arched and solid masonry upon which the hall was built, and plumped into

the *salle de garde* beneath, where again many more had been slain.

With sorrowful hearts we walked outside on the green sward, Maud, with the children about her, looking across at the fatal Cannon Hill, now bare and deserted, all the King's folk, doubtless, having descended into the marshes at the opposite foot of the incline to watch the raising of the monster from her soft bed, and the efforts of a hundred horses to place her again in position in her iron cradle.

But what did we see? Instead of the noble wall of Thrieve, rising with its narrow but well-moulded windows, straight as a cliff to the giddy battlements, a hundred feet above, lo! a great black gash, ragged and unseemly, with gillyflowers and small scaly-leaved ferns clinging droopingly to the edges of the ruin.

And from the hill, whence our fate had descended upon us, there came the sound of a wild crying, which sounded very forlorn and desolate—though likely no more than the voices of the waggoners and engineers of the King urging their horses to the task of rescuing the iron murderer from the suction of the bog.

To us, thus walking, approached James Douglas, courteous and easy in his demeanour as ever.

"This is no place for women and children," he said, holding his steel cap in his hand. "I would that I had you all in a place of safety—in some nunnery or holy house, afar from the storms of war!"

"Trouble not yourself, my lord—we need it not," said Maud; "for me, I am happy to abide by my husband and my children!"

Which was of the nature of an hard saying for me and perhaps for the Earl also.

At any rate James Douglas looked at her long and earnestly.

"It is my duty to remain by the castle so long as one stone stands in its place," he said. "Then—the race of the Douglases of the Black shall have an end!"

To all this I answered naught nor opened my lips. For in my heart I knew that, with a certain nameless

little grave in the kirk acre of Balmaghie, a tomb which carried no inscription or brass monumental—there had, some time before, come to an end the ancient race of the Douglases of Douglas, of Avondale, and of Galloway—a fair sweet end to a race so well called Black.

Furthermore I trusted not at all in the great swelling words of James, Earl of Douglas, who had been my husband.

For I knew him.

CHAPTER XLI

IN THE FRONT OF WAR

THEN came the day, memorable and terrible beyond words, the day of the final breaching. It was on a Wednesday that the great gun was first fired. It took Laurence McKim and his father, together with such as they could use of the King's folk, till Saturday late in the gloaming before they were able to make good the damage, and build such a solid butt of earth backed with stones as would stay the rearward rush of Mons Meg after she had delivered her second message.

But at ten of the clock the next morning, just when the Sabbath bells were beginning to ring in a hundred parish kirks throughout the land, Sholto, who was on the watch, warned us all below. The monster had not yet said her last word. There was more and worse to follow. Again the puff of white reek, lazily disengaging itself from the summit of Knockcannon—again the dreadful pause, the rending crash, the castle rocking to its foundations!

This time the ball from the great cannon had struck the wall of the outer works to the west, toppling over one of the strong corner towers—which, however, thanks to the marvellous mixture of shell lime that held the stones together, fell outwards in one piece as if hewn from the solid rock.

The third ball struck the castle a little lower than the first (that of Wednesday), and succeeded in so enlarging the breach that it became, even to the eyes of Sholto, quite practicable for escalade. The fourth, passing directly through the chasm already made, rattled from side to side of the *salle de garde* like a cube in a dice-box, killing and wounding more than thirty men of the

guard of Thrieve. This, with the fall of the flanking tower, caused a sort of panic among the younger and less experienced of the garrison. There seemed no hope that any within the walls could escape. Several, in Sholto's absence, ran for the fords to the south, only to fall in mid-stream under the sure and deadly fire of the King's archers and arbalast men, who were posted among the bushes on the slope above.

The fifth missile from the Byne, equally well directed, struck low on the wall of the keep, immediately above the arrow slot which looked to the north out of our prison house. The fine sulphury dust well-nigh suffocated us who abode and waited in the entrails of Archibald the Grim.

Strangely enough, though the north-looking slot was now wholly closed by a mass of fallen masonry, we had still plenty of air, though very much less light. Other slits opened into the inner passages of the castle, which as yet had not been obstructed.

Also, and a marvel, the children were not very greatly frightened. To them it was like a thunderstorm without the terror of the lightning. They cried out, indeed, as the great balls struck the castle, but were comforted by clinging to their mother's skirts. Marcelle sat silent and apart, with pale set face, her hands working nervously over her beads, and little David abode in the darkest corner by himself, with his face in his hands, repeating over and over that he was "a great boy, and thunder did not make *him* afraid." This he did to set himself on a higher pedestal than Ulric, who undisguisedly clasped his mother round the neck at each terrifying crash and rocking of the keep.

Those who have only seen the castle afterwards, a desolate and marvellous ruin, towering to the skies, with its riven sides and crumbled battlements, yet for all that, grimly erect in its majesty, can have no idea of the terror of these hours when the whole building seemed ready to dissolve into a heap of stones, not one remaining upon another—as, indeed, Malise McKim had prophesied would be the case.

In Archibald the Grim we women and bairn-folk were shut in. For the space of twenty-four hours we knew not what was happening above—whether those we loved were dead or wounded, or locked together in deadliest combat.

Yet, it might be said, there could be no great anxiety in my heart. For none loved me greatly—save Sholto and Maud, who (as right was) both loved each other more and otherwise. But it was not so. James Douglas was the head of the race. He was the father of the babe William, who rested under the Star in the kirkyard at Balmaghie. He, and he alone, had lain in my bosom. Together we had read all I knew of the book of life. And though that was at an end, such is the miracle of woman's heart, that all was not as if it had never been. I did not wish James Douglas to die. I would rather have died myself—that is, if the choice had been given me.

I was glad, that, in this thing at least, he was no craven. I knew he would be brave, and the thought that he was leading on the Douglases to the fight, holding the deadly breach, cheered (I admit it) these dark hours.

In Archibald the Grim we had, at least, plenty of food and water, and could we have but known what was happening above, I do not think we would have been much afraid or ill-content. But the awful "do-nothingness," which at such times is the lot of women, preyed upon our spirits. We could not get out. The door of the dungeon was locked on the outside, and much sand and earth piled against it to lessen the danger of any rebound of the giant missiles. Sholto had seen to that in the midst of all his troubles. Indeed it was part of his strength that he always thought first of the weak things—the chief part of his greatness also, mayhap.

But there came upon Maud Lindsay and myself—penned there, prison-bound, the fierce desire to be men—to be above, combating the enemy, doing as they did, sharing their perils—if need be, dying their death.

But this, we well knew, was vain. In Archibald the

Grim the night abode unbroken with us, while these last throws of the dice were being cast in the breaches above.

This it was that was happening there.

Simultaneously with the striking of the third bolt upon the castle—that which enlarged the breach, a strong force of the Angus Douglases, together with certain renegade Hamiltons from the West Country, assaulted the works by the ford, where, however (for the instant), the few guardsmen held their own. But the fall of the great flanking tower shook the nerve of our defenders. And those, especially, who, much against the will of Sholto, had been enlisted from Douglasdale and the Upper Ward, finding their own ancient friends and comrades in front of them, hoisted the white flag of surrender. Also a strong storming party crossed the ford and pressed towards the breach which had been made on the northern face of the castle. Their advance ought to have been galled by the bolts and shafts of our men from the ramparts. But such was the terror inspired by the new mode of warfare, that had fire descended from heaven and the levin-bolts stricken Thrieve Castle to the ground, the men of the guard could not have been in a greater amaze.

Let it be remembered that in all the land of the Scots no cannon had ever before been seen which a couple of men could not carry easily upon their shoulders. And now it was with difficulty that the granite balls shot from the huge maw of Mons Meg could be carried on a mason's barrow by two men holding the trams.

There was, therefore, this excuse for the men of the Douglas Guard—they would have died like men under a shower of English clothyard shafts, or encountered steadily with levelled spear the charge of knights steel-clad. But this death, inevitable, coming from far, scattering in its progress not only the bodies of men, but the very defences of solid stone and lime which ages had counted impregnable—no, I blame them not greatly!

Yet there were some who stood firm—some, but very few. One hand will count them all.

The Lord James and Sholto were in the breach of the

outerworks—the high gate of Thrieve still closed behind them, and the yawning chasm in the northward face looking down upon them with the ghastly gaze of a skeleton orbit.

"Go, my Lord," said Sholto, in a low voice, "the charger waits. One of these lads will take him across the water. The other will protect you while you swim after. I will hold the enemy in play in this place long enough to give you a chance. Cross the Dee at the deepest part, plunging in where the water touches the castle wall. Andro the Penman will meet you on the bank with the horse. John here will cover your retreat with his cross-bow. With my axe in my hand I can promise you that they shall not take you in the rear through yonder gap in the hall of the guard—till, at least, you set foot on Balmaghie grass."

This Sholto said, knowing that within a few feet of him his wife and his five children were imprisoned. But such was his duty. He was the Captain of Thrieve, and, whoever escaped, he must bide at his post. For this man, whom he was aiding to escape, was, notwithstanding all, the chief, the Douglas—and in his single person, the last Douglas of the Black.

From beneath, unseen, there was the crying of men about to be slain and of men in the act of slaying. Equally without haste or a moment's hesitation Sholto took his dispositions. He had laid aside his sword of set purpose, and, standing clear of the wall, prepared to fight his last fight, axe in hand. It was a weapon which he had made wholly himself—double-faced, the weight perfectly balanced, the handle of stout ash, well seasoned, not quite straight, but with a certain backward twist in it near the head which, as Sholto fancied, suited his hand. It was a terrible weapon in the hand of a master of it, and fitted for the roughest battle-play. Sholto had made it neither too sharp nor yet too highly tempered, judging that the weight of the stroke would do the work. Indeed, well-nigh he had quarrelled with his father upon the subject. For the old man had fixed ideas upon tempering and the art of weapon-making.

He had, however, very soon a chance of testing practically the theories of his eldest son.

Now, James Douglas, seeing that all was lost, proved not difficult to persuade. He must, he said, trust to a good horse and the ship waiting in the Dutchman's Lake at Kirkcudbright to carry Douglas and his fortunes, for a time at least, to another country.

"After all," he added, "I am the only one who, in the event (which seems certain) of the castle surrendering, would of a surety be executed. James Stewart simply could not spare a third Earl of Douglas after slaying two already! As for you, Sholto McKim, they will give *you* quarter for the asking, and the women and bairns are as safe in Grim Archibald as in their own beds!"

"So?" said Sholto quietly. "At any rate it is time to be going! These Penman lads will put you safely through the deeps of the Dee. The horse is ready at the water port. Trust me—I will keep your rear-guard until such time as I see you set spurs in your beast on the other side of the Pool of Thrieve."

"I go," said James Douglas, "but only under protest—since you judge it for the best! And I pray you bid farewell to——"

"I will," said Sholto. "Go quickly!"

And James Douglas departed thus—even thus—slipping out by a secret passage from his own ancient castle of Thrieve, never to enter it again.

The same white charger which had brought him so gloriously home from Arkinholm was already gingerly pacing down the steps which led to the great western Pool of Thrieve—one of the deepest in the whole course of the Dee. Sholto had rightly judged. So strong was the enemy's belief that on that side no one could possibly escape from the Castle, that no notice was taken of the attempt till Andro the Penman and his charge were nearly across, with James Douglas swimming less strongly behind—for he was of Avondale, and little accustomed to squattering out and in of the water all day long like the lads of Thrieve.

But ere they could land a few archers ran by the fallen tower which flanks the water, clambering over the *débris* to shoot at the fugitives.

"*Twang!*" went the crossbow of John the Penman from the water-port.

"Good lad!" quoth Sholto under his breath, "now you are at a better job than sitting upon the bald rump of Douglas the Black in the midst of the shallows of Glenlochar while the kirk folk pass laughing by."

"*Twang!*" Again Jack the Penman loosed his bow. And another Angus archer fell. Down went another, a lank, lean, flea-bitten man from the salt-marshes of Solway.

But at that moment, breaking in dense clusters through the fords, overleaping the first wall of defence came the rush of the besiegers, solid and determined. Sholto stepped a yard to his own front, turned the axe in his fingers, hefted it till the grip suited his hand, swung it once so as to be sure of clearing everything. And was ready.

CHAPTER XLII

SHOLTO STANDS IN THE BREACH

SHOLTO stood in the breach, waiting. Never soldier about to die looked his enemy more steadily in the face. I think, if my babe had lived, he would have been a soldier like Sholto, a man like him. I could not wish a better wish for him. May the sons of all good mothers be even as Sholto McKim—is the prayer of a sonless woman.

Behind him the castle towered up grey and massy, the vast rent in its northerly side, for which the stormers were striving, making a black irregular patch on the cliff of stone and lime. That, at all hazards, he must defend. Once entered there, not only would the whole castle lie void of defence, but from the water gate and the balcony the King's men could shoot at their ease the swimmers across the Pool of Thrieve.

In the first rush of the stormers were Hugh Morton and Laurence.

"Stand back there!" cried Sholto. "I desire not your blood, brother!"

Gripping with both hands, Sholto swung his axe once—and Hugh Morton, smitten through the guard, fell with a cry to the ground. The ashen shaft had been cunningly strengthened with iron at the end nearest the axe-head. It could not be cut with a sword.

"Hold, brother!" answered Laurence, "I also have no quarrel with you. Let James Douglas come forth! He hides behind you! For this I laid aside my robe of abbot—to cross swords with him."

For as yet none of the assailants knew the attempt that was being made to afford the chief of the house of Douglas a last chance of escape.

"I am here in this place to do my duty against you or any man!" quoth Sholto, balancing his axe with loving particularity.

And for a long minute none dared to try that path perilous across the breach. But there was one behind, somewhat less active than the youths who led the first rush of stormers, who yet toiled manfully behind. Malise McKim it was who came across the grass, his great two-handed sword naked in his hand. He paused a moment, looming up vast and weighty by comparison with his son, as Mons Meg herself set on end beside a pennon-lance at a tent door.

Father and son stood face to face. A certain hesitation, not unnatural, manifested itself among the assailants. Laurence had no wish to slay his brother, nor yet to be slain by him in such a quarrel. Though the fall of young Hugh Morton had stayed the first rush of the stormers, yet, as Laurence well knew, the end was certain. But Malise had other thoughts in his mind. There was no halt or compromise in that sombre red eye.

"Sholto," he cried, "stand aside! Or, by St. Bride, I will e'en slay thee with my hand—first-born son of my body though you be!"

"Slay!" said Sholto. "This is my place. I will stand here till I die—or till that is accomplished which I fight for!"

"You fight, then, to let James Douglas, the traitor, the enemy of your own house, escape!"

"Even so!" said Sholto calmly.

Then Malise McKim, the madness rising suddenly in his eyes, raised his two-handed sword over his shoulders and smote. Lightly Sholto stepped aside. The swing of the blade, taking the edge of the breach, cut through part of the sea-shell plaster, and jarred with terrific force against the freestone of a lintel. The shock brought the Armourer to his knees, and in that moment, if so he had chosen, Sholto might easily have slain his father.

But, stepping quietly back, Sholto permitted the

smith to arise, contenting himself with swinging his axe and measuring once again the length and freedom of his stroke. Whereat, seeing him as they thought embarrassed, a pair of Lothian men, Crichton of Brunston and Mickle Rob of the Nine Mile Stane sprang forward together. But the axe of the Captain of the Guard had two faces, and with them Sholto struck this way and that with the swiftness of lightning. Shoulder to the right and face to the left, bore witness to the virtue which abode in the cunning bend of that ash shaft a foot from the axe-head which, together with Sholto's wrist action, doubled the spring of the stroke. Of the two, Brunston proved the luckier, and Mickle Rob went visage-marred for the rest of his life.

Meanwhile Malise had recovered himself, and strangely, he was angry with his son—indeed, far more angry than before.

"Sholto McKim," he cried, "deliver to me that man —James Douglas! Or else I will make a road to him over your dead body and cloven skull. That you are my son matters nothing. That you keep me from my revenge, matters all!"

He advanced upon Sholto again with the dull fury in his eyes kindling red like a smithy fire when the bellows are plied.

"Stand forth like a man and fight!" he cried. "No dancing-master tricks will serve you a second time!"

"Father," said the young man, "slay me if you can. I will strike you no stroke. But I have my duty to do. I fight to foil, but not to wound—not to kill. You are my father!"

"You speak as you fight, to waste time. Let me pass—yea or nay?"

"Nay, then, my father!" said Sholto.

Whereupon half a dozen of the King's men, impatient at the delay, were about to rush the breach.

"He cannot slay us all—at him, I say! Fall on!" cried Angus Douglas, eager to be done with the fray.

"Leave this young man to me," shouted Malise. "I who have given him life, will reive the life from him.

I will render him the death of a traitor to his own house —of one who hath shamed his sister, the daughter of his mother!"

Against his father, Sholto could only oppose his youthful litheness and such defence as he was able to make, using his Lochaber axe as a shield.

The Armourer's blow descended a second time—furious, annihilating, even had it been sustained by an armoured man. But Sholto, gliding forward, let it fall on his axe-head between the falcon-spur and the blade. The first it shore completely away, but the young man dexterously lowering his weapon, so directed the stroke that the blade of the two-handed sword glided along the steel strengthening of the shaft, and finally struck harmlessly, scoring the ground at his father's feet.

Then arose a great crying and running about the defences of the castle. Some mounted on the fallen tower and began shooting arrows into the Pool of Dee. The fugitives had been discovered. But by this time, owing to Sholto's stubborn defence, the distance was too great from any part of the castle accessible to the archers. Had these been able to mount the battlements of the castle, or above all to penetrate to the water-gate from which Andro the Penman and James Douglas had gone forth, they might have marked the swimmers down at their leisure. Even as it was, the young Captain of the Guard of Thrieve had several anxious moments.

But Sholto's defence had been sufficient. The forefeet of the white charger were already on the turf of the Balmaghie shore. The light saddle, which Andro the Penman, swimming strongly, had carried across on his head was in its place, and all scathless, James Douglas was galloping southward through the thick woods, by paths which he knew perfectly, ere a final rush of stormers, directed in a fierce stream through the breach, carried Sholto off his feet. His father's sword descended on his head as he fell. He was dashed this way and that, even carried into the interior of the castle by that turbulent overwhelming tide of men.

Unconscious as if in sleep the waters closed over the

Captain of Thrieve. The strong castle which he had held, as it had been with his sole arm, passed for ever out of the hands of its ancient possessors. But there was a man, black with the grime of Mons Meg, a man with nothing of the King about him save a red scar on his face who stood over him crying aloud, "Save the young man! Lay him in a safe place! Do not trample on one so brave. The time is at hand when I shall have need of such!"

And it was indeed the King. For once the last and best friend of the fallen house owed his safety to their worst enemy.

On the strand of the Pool of Thrieve, vainly cursing, imprecating, foaming at the mouth with baffled fury, Malise the Smith stood watching James Douglas—the man for whom so many had flung away their lives, ride comfortably into the deep, green solitudes of the Balmaghie woods. Ah, if he could only have gotten once within arm's length of his unconscious son—at that moment, Sholto McKim would soon have paid the penalty from which he had saved the enemy of his house.

It is the testimony of all that Malise McKim was never the same man after this terrible disappointment. He had been balked of his vengeance, when it seemed within his grasp, and from that time forth a film of the red stood between eye and brain. From that moment reason and memory abode but occasionally with him.

"Mons Meg! Mons Meg!" he would cry, striking his clenched hand on the table till the whole house rang again. "What is this prate of Mons Meg? What hath she done? Sandy Weir the Dumfries cooper had done as muckle with a wine-vat laid on its side! Dung down Thrieve—you say, given victory to the King? Bah! what of that? A puff-ball that cracks under one's foot on the green! *Doth not James Douglas live?* And was he not saved by the sword of my son? Answer me that!"

But there was none that could make denial—nor indeed dared.

"Then," he would cry, having put all to silence, "let me hear no more prating of Mons Meg!"

And had the King not prevented, the fit being on him, he would have taken a forehammer and destroyed the great cannon with his own hand.

CHAPTER XLIII

IN THE NIGHT SEASON ONE COMETH UP

As to us who were confined in Archibald the Grim, these events passed literally over our heads, and left us no whit the wiser. Indeed, till the door of our prison-house was opened we knew nothing certainly, and he who brought us forth was the same Young Man in Black, sometime Abbot of Sweetheart, Laurence McKim.

And through all the sad destruction which the bombardment had wrought upon Thrieve—the down-trampled southerly garden which had once been for a joy to me, my solace in many lonely years, the misty glory of a too brief dream, I could not help rejoicing that it was finished—this life I had not chosen to live, but which had been thrust upon me from my birth. I do not say that afterwards it had not seemed natural. The love of Maud and the devotion of Sholto had made it even simple and tolerable. Yet even now, when I am old and have known many women, I judge there are but few such upon the earth who in their youth have had an experience stranger than mine.

There is this to be added—I knew no other. For the loves of Maud and Sholto seemed to me even as those of a father and mother to the children of a house—something in the nature of things, inevitable, existing from the beginning, continuing unto the end.

But for myself I expected no such love to come into my life. Was I not Princess of Galloway—Countess of Douglas, what you will! To the end I was fated to be a tennis ball that flies this way and that between the players. So, being born to a principality desired of men, it seemed natural to me.

So that being done with, I was glad to be quit of Thrieve—of the hideous confinement in the dungeon of Archibald the Grim, of the blind waiting, of the thunder

of the rending shock, and the terror of great darkness. But it seemed still better to me (whatever might hereafter befall me) that I should never more see the face of James Douglas—never hear his voice, so smooth, so insinuating when he would—at other times with the rasp of command in it! Therefore, because I desired to forget, said Maud Lindsay, it is certain that I never truly loved him.

At any rate, it was done with, princessdoms and splendid prison houses. And James Douglas, too, was done with. From the time he set foot on the little English ship in the Dutchman's Lake at Kirkcudbright, I knew that I should see my husband's face no more. It was not his way, with all his faults, to return to take a second place where once he had reigned supreme.

Then it was that, leaving Sholto to recover from his wounds under the care of Maud, in an untouched southerly corner of ruined Thrieve (a guard of King's men being also in possession to see all safe in the interests of James Stewart), I was taken northward with the royal army.

Laurence McKim, to whom the King, in fulfilment of his promise, had accorded his own name, together with the forfeited estates of Balveny, which had belonged to that Little John, who died so well at Arkinholm, wished to send me for shelter to the good sisters of the Sweetheart. But of this the King, who had his own purposes to serve and his own interests to consolidate, would hear nothing. "A Countess of Douglas within the bounds of Galloway might," he said, "easily become a standard of revolt."

In vain I besought James Stewart, even on my knees, to permit me to abide in some place where I should hear no more the storms of war, nor know the ill hearts of men.

"Let me be always with Maud and Sholto," I said. "I will be a serving-maid to their bairns, if you will. But as you love God, let me no more be tossed about, a cork on the waves of man's ambition! I have suffered enough. Now let me have peace!"

"They tell me," he answered not unkindly, "that you had over long time peace, and thought no great things thereof. Yet it may be that they lie!"

"They do lie and in their throats!" I cried. "Only let me abide in peace with those who do love me, and I shall ask no more. At least *I* have never conspired against you!"

He shook his head not ill-naturedly.

"Of that I am none so sure, little lady," he answered. "You are a Douglas, every inch of you, and it were ill for a Stewart to trust to one of that breed. Mayhap, however, a tacked-on Stewart may have better fortune with you than one true born!"

What he meant I had no notion of then, nor yet for long afterwards. So in spite of my prayers, they brought me by slow stages to Stirling, that fatal town. At every burgh the triumph of the royal arms was received with shoutings and processioning, with lurid torches flaring in the darkness by night, and parti-coloured flannel petticoats strung across the miry roadway by day.

I even recognised some of the latter. James and I had laughed at them, sitting together, hand in each other's hand, those times when, with a great retinue, he and I had made our well-nigh progresses. It was all the same. Those who had shouted for the great Earl of the South in his day, now shouted just as loud for the King of the North. And the goodwives were as ready to hang out their gay kerchiefs and wilicoats for one as for the other. For which small blame to them.

Little difference they kenned 'twixt earl and king. Both alike claimed lodging for their men. Neither paid a groat for bed or board. And if the honest burghers gat off with that, they might count themselves lucky. For soldiers are soldiers all the world over, wherever there is a pike to carry or a town to sack, and the fear of the King, and still more of Malise McKim's red eye, had held them somewhat severely in check at Thrieve. Moreover, there was not a silver pound of

treasure in the Castle, nor, saving Maud and myself, a woman within the four walls, both which lackings must notoriously have galled these honest fellows.

Laurence would have been glad to abide with his brother Sholto, but this also the King had no mind for.

His mind was all set on the making of great and even greater guns, of the sort which in such brief space had brought Thrieve to the ground. He dreamed of the conquest of England, of the battering down of all the border fortresses as far as York, of humbling the King of England as he had already done my Lord of Douglas. "If the Earl has escaped," he said, "why, so much the better; he will carry the news of Mollance Meg and her works!"

And for this he saw in Laurence the brain and skill of plan, in Malise and the other McKims the instruments ready to his hand.

But it came to pass that, though the malady of the Armourer Smith grew rapidly upon him, the King would by no means permit either Malise or any of his family to leave his company, but carried him and his great cannon, with shoutings and honour, through the towns of Dumfries, Lanark, and, lastly, Renfrew, together with its pendicle, the little insignificant village of Glasgow, seated on a knoll, all broom and gorse, above a fine, clear river, the which possesses a kirk of a size most disproportioned to the needs of the mean fisher-folk who dwell there.

So when we came to Stirling, and saw the castle and palace, magnificent upon their ridge, right royal and comely we found them after the raft of pig-styes we had passed through of late. For Thrieve, surrounded with a river which cleansed all things and said no word, had given me a distaste for the rubbish heaps and cabbage leaves of the Scots burghs, with their other disconvenances yet more grievous, such as only a new flood of Noë would be able thoroughly to sweep away.

So, as I say, we came to Stirling. And yet my head being no little mazed, it came about I scarce knew it

for the royal town. Sometimes I seemed to be in Edinburgh, and more often at Amboise—sometimes in a mere city of faërie. For, with the long final stage and the chill (it was a winter's day, grey and hard), and the King being determined to sleep at home that night, come what would, I was wearied far past my ordinary, and fain to rest, had it been in no better than a hayloft.

So we rode within the court of the palace by eight of the clock, and, messengers having been sent on before, there was a great banquet ready in the hall. But as for me, though the King came in person to invite me, and showed himself most desirous to forget the past, I pleaded that I was wearied out of all bearing, and so gat leave to betake me at once to my chamber, which was on the ground floor, and opened on a court.

For, indeed, the heart was sick within me with yearning for Maud to comfort me, and with all that had passed during these terrible last days. So, having partaken of no sustenance, though Laurence knocked repeatedly with certain dainties for the sustaining of my strength and the tempting of my appetite, I would not open to him; the desire to eat was clean gone from me. So, without even entering into parley, I threw me on the bed and slept.

. . . . . .

I know not what hour of the night it might have been, nor yet whether I slept or waked. But deep in the heart of night, when even the soul of man turns to water within him as when a spirit passes by, and that of woman is afraid at the cheep of the mouse behind the wainscot, I awaked or seemed to awake in my bed.

I had cast me down as I was, stretched out in my great cloak of voyage; and lo! when I awoke, the candle I had brought with me was burned down to a sort of broad yellow flickering in the socket. Nevertheless, the chamber being situate where it was, on the ground floor, the room was indistinctly lit with the illuminated torches of the masquers and mummers without who had come to wait upon the King in the great courtyard,

while opposite my own lodging a cresset full of pine-knots, well rosined, burned in an iron basket. For many such conveniences, which even at Thrieve were never heard of, had been brought from France and Italy to the new palace of the King.

The chamber, therefore, where I lay was by no means dark. Or at least, so it seemed in my dream or vision of the night (I take it not upon me to say which it was).

But at the foot of my bed, between me and the window, plain as I see the paper I write upon, I saw William Douglas, who had been my husband. Of that I would take mine oath upon my dying bed.

He stood and looked down upon me—much as he used to do, but as I thought, more tenderly—as it had been, more like to Laurence. It was, however, difficult to see his face, for his back was toward the lights without.

Then (always in my dream of the night) he said to me, "Margaret!"

And when I could not move my tongue to answer—not for fear, because it all appeared natural and naught out of place or to be affrayed of—he said again and in a more gentle tone, "Margaret!"

At the same time he came close up to me, and placed his hand upon my shoulder.

Whereat I rose up slowly, and not being yet rightly awake, sat on the bedside and regarded him. He seemed strangely kind. But still, being against my will compelled to remain silent, I said nothing, sitting tongued-tied and awkward before him.

Then he (or else that which stood there in his place, being permitted) took me by the hand and said, "Rise, Margaret, there is somewhat in the garden without, which it behoves you to look upon!"

So at these words I rose up and stood before him, and the revellers tossing torches in the air without for the first time caused the light to shine on his face. It was gentle and grave as ever, but sweeter, and as if proven by a lifetime of adversity. Ah, if only he had looked at me like that in the woods of Cour Cheverney.

Then came the word to me suddenly. I was not afraid, then—no, nor yet at the ending of all.

"Are you indeed my husband whom the King slew treacherously?" I asked of him.

He put out his hand—or the semblance of a hand, still gently, and as it were with deprecation.

"It is past! Let it pass!" he said. "James the King is king in this realm to-day—not the best sort of king—but yet, perhaps, better for this folk than William of Douglas would have been. Have no fear of James Stewart, King of Scots!"

"But he is a murderer!"

"There are many ways of slaying—but one death!" said the figure which had come to me in my dream; "James Stewart is a rough, violent man, but not, in his heart of hearts, evil. Let that which he hath done be forgot!"

"How can I know that you speak truth?" I moaned. "There are, say the priests, spirits evil and spirits good—dreams that warn and instruct, and dreams that lead only to destruction. How can I be sure?"

"By this sign," he said. "Bide a moment: wait for the man that hath been your husband, and for the sign he will bring in his arms."

And in a moment he was not. Yet there remained, as it were, a kind of bluish haze, like moonshine striking slantwise through a skylight, in the place where he had stood.

I remained fixed in amazement. Yet it was of a chilly sort, and wholly without fear. Rather a certain reverence descended upon me, and I waited not unwillingly. And in a little while, with a bright, shining light, he returned, carrying a child in his arms. And, lo! I did not need to be told. It was my babe, the babe who had been laid in the holy ground in the kirk acre of Balmaghie, God and the monks of Sweetheart giving him good rest! But grown and glorified, and like the angels of heaven for beauty!

This time none spoke; but the babe smiled upon me, and held out its little arms.

"Mine," I cried, and again "Mine!" Then I started forward to take him to my bosom.

At that, like the clapping of hands, all vanished, and I was alone, save that I heard a Voice from High Above (not that of William Douglas), which said, like a master correcting a child's faulty lesson, "*Mine also!*"

And this was the end of my dream. For when I came to myself, lo, I was by the tall window! The chamber was empty, lit only by the uncertain flicker of the cresset dying down on the opposite wall. I was broad awake. Yet, if I had been asleep, I have no cognisance of how or when I awaked. The dream and the reality seemed one.

. . . . .

Then it came to me to do what He, my visitant, had said—to go into the enclosure on which my window opened. It was not the great wide court where the guards tramp to and fro all night, calling the hour and clanking iron heels, but an inner court or garden—close in the midst of the castle.

With difficulty I opened the window, which appeared strangely glued and long disused. It was a tall window like those I had been accustomed to in France. And so with only two steps I found myself on the short grass, grey and stiff with the November frost. Above, the trees were black and bald against the sky, reaching out their branches like withered hands, clutching whole clusters of the stars.

On the hill of Ballingeich, near by, they had lighted a bonfire in honour of the King's return. It had flamed, mounted, lowered, and now, like the cresset, was burning red and low. But on the frosty grass of the little court-yard it made a ruddy reflection which served somewhat to guide me.

I went out, scarce knowing what I did, save that I had been called in a dream. The enclosure was but a grass plot with ancient trees planted all about, mostly close to the walls. But as I went across the short grass, my foot caught on a mound, heaped like a grave, but not new-made. For the grass grew thick upon it, though not so spiky and strong as elsewhere.

There was no stone at head or foot. But, as in the dream, my heart knew all. Someone had scribbled on the wall under the dying cresset these words:

"SO PERISH ALLE TRAITOURS!"

But there was for me no need for that assurance. The man who was the truest of the true—so true that he trusted his house's enemy against the warnings of his own (and died for the mistake)—lay at my feet.

My husband, William of Douglas! I knew him at last! There was none like him—there could be none—loyal, silent, faithful, always speaking good and always fearless of evil. In this place he lay, treacherously slain by the hand of his Sovereign, after the salt eaten, the banquet spread, the loving hand about the neck, as is the wont of brother with brother.

And it seemed to me, that if I could but have recalled the past and the years that had overflown, I would never any more have misjudged him, but understood and helped him in his great aims.

That he had never loved me as it is the right of every woman to be loved, being wedded, seemed to matter but little now. I should have drawn him—so I told myself—taken him, held him—given him, home-returning, the comfort of mutual understanding, of love, touched him to humaner purposes, to the issues which some name passionate, but which also are divine.

Ah, but—I could not. It was too late. It was not so written, and the High Wall of Destiny who shall overleap?

Yet the heart within me was wae to think what he, the greatest of the race, had missed. William Douglas had known the vast unsatisfied loneliness of inheriting a matchless name. He had proved the still greater loneliness of companying perforce with ignoble men. The jar and fret of statecraft, the shaping of little means to great purposes—the triumph, partly assured, yet more and better seen in prospect—these and these alone, had been his, before treachery, rank and foul, cut him off.

But these things which he had missed—the love of woman—the prattle of children—sons to bear his name, daughters held among the honourable of the earth! Ah, how much more and greater they were! Better still—the sweet serenities of the hearthstone, the tears at parting, more in the throat than in the eyes, the glad laughters and claspings of homecoming, when, after toil accomplished, he should return bringing his sheaves with him.

And as I thought upon these things, I threw me on my face, vehemently kissing the cold turf, frost spangled, under which I judged his head to lie.

"I would have given you all these," I moaned, "all these and more, had you but asked me. But you would not—you would not!"

. . . . . .

Long I lay thus, knowing nothing and thinking nothing, insensate as the dust beneath. Then into my heart there stole a conviction, that was all the surer because it came to me this time without spoken word or angelic dream.

I knew (I know not how, but of a certainty I knew) how in That Country where the children grow up without sin (God's nursery, mayhap) the babe that had been born to me was growing up in the care and tendence of that all-princely spirit, making ready to be another and more humane William Douglas, not unworthy of him who, through infinite misunderstandings and shortcomings, had yet been my true husband.

So, much comforted, rising up, I went within. And after that, even as the Solway tides erase a name writ upon the sands, that of James Douglas came no more into my heart as the name of a man I had loved.

CHAPTER XLIV

THE WOODS OF BIRNAM

Now the life at Stirling grew not to be long-time endured by me. The chamber where the blow was stricken, the yard where the dead lay buried, the vaunting courtiers, the painted courtesans parading the town with their scented lovelocks and empty mirth, all bore so heavy on my spirit that I was like to die, just to look from my window and see it all.

Then it was that Laurence (who to hide his sometime abbatical dignity was now called by the King's name, "Laurence Stewart") proved kind with a kindness which cannot be counted in tale, or weighed in any balance.

For one thing he took upon him to spare me the pain of coming and going to the royal table, being great with James Stewart, and he of the Fiery Face refusing him nothing. Nevertheless at first the King would allow no further relaxation of watchfulness than to permit me to abide in my own apartment in the palace. So it is small wonder that I waxed pale of face and of my person meagre to look upon. For myself I thought that, having seen the dead that first night of my arriving at Stirling, I also should surely die. For so runs the rune, and indeed I was no ways unwilling it should be so.

But I was to find that it is not given to a woman to die when she will. Many, pressed by griefs and falsities, have tried it, and prayed to God for it sore and often, but save at the knife's edge, it is not granted to woman's heart thus to break and pass like a bubble that is blown. So I did not die, pray as I might.

Then at last, when Laurence had prepared the plans for certain great new cannon, which he and his father were to forge somewhere on the straths by Carron Water, he besought the King again to permit me to retire

from the court, to some more peaceful and quiet habitation.

"Ah," cried the King, "I know you, Sir Laurence. You would have her back to her own country again, where every third man is a disbanded rebel, every second a dour Douglas, and ilka man, woman, and bairn a born traitor to the King! Na, na, Stewart in name though you be, ye shall not wile the lass back in her turbulent southland. Let her gang, an it please her, to the guid Grey Toon o' Dunfermline, where it sends its reek up fornent Edinburgh hersel'. Or let her gang to the kind woman folk at Birnam, near to Dunkeld, where is a nunnery, and a bonny water rinning clear an' broon, wi' grand fish for the catchin' and the rae deer jookin goot o' ilka covert. Let her choose! But to the south she shallna gang!"

So it came about that to Birnam I went, where the house of the good Sisters of Peace looked down on the towers of the cathedral out of a kind of green silence.

Then, indeed, there was time for rest and thought, most sweet and needful to me. For though I minded not greatly at the time the battering of Mons Meg, and the terrible thunderbolts which she launched upon us, yet when all was over and done with, I dared not walk by the archery butts for fear of the whistle of arrows. And if so much as a hare broke from a fern at my feet, or a blackbird chattered among the bushes, I would leap and cry aloud like a halfling dairymaid, at play round the corn-stalks with the lads what time the gloaming falls.

But at Birnam we dwelt in a kind of tranced peace. The Superior was of the King's house—cousin-german, indeed, to that knight of Lorn whom his mother had married after his father's death at Perth—a woman well on in years and who showed me much favour from the first. This, I fear me, was not wholly on my account. Indeed I cannot lay it in any part to my own credit.

Now, how the loon managed it I know not, but from the very first the Mother Superior took a vast liking to Laurence, saying that he was the moral and image of

her brother John, who had died in his youth, stricken in the eye with a lance in some tournaying in France.

Perhaps Master Laurence gave the lady to know that, though now permitted by the highest authority to return to the world and carry mail and casque, he, too, had once in his time worn the robe ecclesiastic, and gone on great embassies—yea, even to the Holy See itself. At all events, so it was. Laurence had extraordinary privileges among the Little Sisters of Peace, and I, as a guest and the King's ward, still more as his friend, could do much as I chose in the house of these good women of Birnam.

This, as I say, came about out of no great love for me on the part of the most excellent Mother Agneta; for, truth to tell, save Maud, I have never drawn ordinary women to me, nor been wholly happy in their society. For the most part, they have been to me (saving, of course, Maud) as so much unripe fruit, chattering and back-biting, becking and bowing their heads over some scraplet of news, or breaking their backs at some endless broidering of bed-covers.

Now men, even in their wrong-doing, are not so. They wring the purple juice from the grapes in full vintage—yes; they eat the apples of the knowledge of good and evil till the fiery sword drives them forth, waving every way before the port of Paradise! But they do not—at least, not the men I have known—speak evil of their neighbours behind backs, nor make of the house-place, from roof-tree to cellarage, a fret and a brawling, with their railing accusations and the yelp of their ill-natured yatter.

By St. Bride, I would choose rather to spend ages in Purgatory with some sinner of sins, great and strong, apparent as Lebanon and salt as the sea, rather than share an alcove in Paradise with suchlike women. And that is my mind upon the matter—concerning which enough said. Mayhap 'tis more than will be held to my credit. Many women there are whose ways and hearts are otherwise—only, saving Maud, I have not met them.

So as I have related, Laurence of the King's name

came over to Birnam, as often as his Majesty's zeal for military enginry would permit him to steal away from the making of cannon.

And the oftener he came, the better pleased was Sister Agneta, till at last she got to calling him her brother John, and ended, as I think, by believing herself that he was indeed of her blood and family—all of which was of little enough consequence to a young woman like myself, save as matter for laughter afterwards.

So in the woods of Birnam Laurence and I walked, as we had done (it seemed a myriad of years gone) in those of Cour Cheverney. But there was no making of mill wheels now, nor any setting of paper boats, cunningly devised, adrift down the swift-running Tay. Once, I remember, Laurence tried it. But the old sunlight that had glinted through the white poplars at Cour Cheverney and even gilded the birches on the Balmaghie slopes, would not shine for us on Tayside and in the midst of this drear December.

Faintly we smiled to each other at the lack of success, and I for one knew that for the present, at least, the house of life was left to me empty and desolate. In my cupboards there were no more any conserves of delight. The palaces were emptied of myrrh and aloes and cassia, and I, who had been reared as a king's daughter, whose garments had been of wrought gold, walked in a black widow's weeds among an unwedded sisterhood.

My husband? He had fled to England. And I knew him. While I lived he would return no more. Soon he would find some pretext for divorce—that I abode with the King of Scots, that I companied with his enemies—anything—so that he might put me from him in name as he had already done so in fact.

Yet to all this I was strangely callous. For in me also there was part of the Douglas heritage. From the first of our race, with here and there an exception to make sure the rule, the Douglases had been ready to forget that which they left behind. Did not, for the sake of the glory of battle and the heady whirlwind of the charge,

our Good Sir James himself forget the sacred mission he had sworn, to lay the heart of the Bruce in holy earth? And as he, so, and with worse excuses, the others!

Some for the honour of military renown, some for glory in the State (and of these last the chief was he who had died at Stirling), others for a fair woman—as my well-beloved brother William, who, ere at Edinburgh they cut off his comely head, lifted up the goblet and drank his last toast to the woman who had betrayed him, in these words, memorable amongst us for ever:

"I drink to you, my lady and my love!"

Some, not one woman only, tempted to forget the things that lay behind. And of such was that strong man James Douglas—strong, yet like to the statue with the head of gold and the feet of clay seen by the prophet. He was not born to be faithful, this James of Douglas, and now, after the first wrench, the keen jarring *tang* of the viol's string as it broke—lo! I cared as little for him as he for me.

At Birnam I had liberty to sit at ease in these sweet solitudes, and with peaceful books to while away the hours. Lives of saints and suchlike were there in loads —every page a-drowse with dreamiest opiates, poppy, pulsatilla, mandragore. Nevertheless, with the Douglas unrest, I yearned for other things than this, and that before long I desired to be as free in name as in reality. By the King's mandate of annulment of my marriage? No! I could have had that for the asking. By the dissolving power of the Holy Father? Three times no. I had surely more than enough of his holy Bulls. They were Bulls barren, without power to bind or loose, without power or progeny. "The Pope's Bulls get no calves!" quoth the profane under their breaths.

No, James Douglas himself would of a certainty serve my turn. Give him line enough, and a little time. He would remarry him. Neither the thought of the woman who, in the gardens of Thrieve, had waited ten years in silence and solitude, only that at the end he should betray her—no, nor yet the memory of the girl who had shed her blood that she might save his life would have

a moment's power to hold him back when the desire of the eye came upon him. I knew the breed—a right strong, masculine, give-and-take breed it is, but not one fortunate to the end. The hand of the Righteous is against it! At the end of its lusting it shall pull down the branch and bite the Sodom apple, to find therein only dust and ashes—exceeding bitter fruit.

James Douglas was like the man I had heard Laurence read of in his Latin Scripture. He could take his sword and go forth to rob, and to slay, and to sail upon the sea. He could look forth like a lion into the darkness, and after he had slain and robbed and returned, he would lay all at the feet of his love—his new love whom he had found and drawn to him by the same power wherewith he had drawn me—me and That Other.

But at the uttermost end of all, God, sitting still on High, would enter into judgment with the strong man!

Thus, in the meantime, I was not ill-content to abide at Birnam and await the things which I knew would come to pass. Here Laurence, riding mostly from Stirling and returning ere he was missed to the forging of his cannons, was my chief visitor, and certainly he was the one best pleasing to the Lady Superior.

And after a time there came back to his eyes some part of his old innocent boyish insolence. For this, too, I liked him only the better. No ways as great as Sholto was Laurence McKim—far from being so good. Yet, I think he suited me best. I had no wish to marry him, God knows, yet had he set about to marry himself to another woman, I had never cared to look man in the face again. And I had had that feeling almost from the time I was a girl. Even at Cour Cheverney, if I could have disposed of myself I would have chosen Laurence. Or, at least, so it seems now.

Sholto could do great things—not only *could,* but *did* them as they came—making them only part of his daily work. Great, simple, large of heart and determinate in action, it was difficult to find a fault in him. I suppose Maud knew of many such that he had. But if she did—at least she never named them to me.

But with Laurence all was otherwise. He had his moments of something like pettishness. He would keep aloof from Birnam for weeks, judging that I had not used him well enough, or with some light word of mine rankling in his heart, like a thorn in the flesh.

Thus one day I asked how he could bring himself to aid in the breaking down of Thrieve by great bolts of cannon, knowing what he knew—that not only was I there, but another woman, the wife of his brother, and with her five little children.

Right sharply he answered me.

"Whether or not I had assisted, the bolt would have been launched just the same. The castle would have fallen. All that I did was to make the blow sharp and sure. Moreover, my brother Sholto was Captain of Thrieve, had been so for many years, and I judged that he could find means to protect his own!"

Then I asked him another question.

"And in all this, did you never once think of me? Or had you already become a Stewart?"

He answered me with a sudden flash of anger, such as Sholto would never have shown to any woman.

"I thought a great deal of the man, your husband!"

"Ah," I asked again, "and pray, Laurence Stewart, what did you think concerning him?"

"This," he cried the words fiercely, "each time I pointed the cannon, I prayed that the ball might strike him dead!"

"Ah," I answered provokingly, "I knew you were a man powerful in prayer! Give me your blessing, holy man!"

CHAPTER XLV

THE PEACE OF ZIMRI

At last there came for me a certain glad day when the ploughs on all the open straths were blithely upturning the fallow, and the whole world was filled with the swirling of white gulls and the smell of fresh red earth—a heartsome day it was and a heartsome thing its morning hours brought me.

For several weeks Laurence had appeared and disappeared at intervals, saying no more than that he was upon the King's business. And I, thinking in my heart that he might have told me more, and doubtless some deal nettled at his silence, had held my tongue and refrained from questioning him—which (I confess) was far from being my habit.

But this one day, by the grace of the Lady Agneta, he entered into my chamber, and with a serious face, asked me to come to the door, for there were certain poor persons there, begging for my assistance. But I believed him not. For at this time it was his delight to take me in and cheat me into believing absurdities, rejoicing thereat afterwards, like a very schoolboy. The which was foolish of him, yet nevertheless a cheerful, likeable trait after all, speaking of a heart light and easeful within.

So for a while I would not go forth, fearing ridicule. Because in his eye, for all his grave mien, there abode a certain lurking twinkle which aforetime had betrayed his evil intents to me more than once. But at long and last I did go to the little wicket-gate of the convent. Laurence threw it wide open.

And there before my eyes stood Maud, my Maud, with all the five children about her, and behind, halting a little upon a staff and greatly paler than was his wont, I saw Sholto! I kissed them all—yes, even Sholto, who

blushed and stammered that he was not worthy—that I was his liege lady and—other things which I forget.

Whereat, so glad was I, that I kissed him again, having ever a greedy tooth for kissing and nothing to wear it on of late.

Which observing, Laurence looked so fain that I drew myself apart with Maud, and bade her tell me all there was to tell of her journey, and where she meant to abide. Then it came out that Master Laurence had interceded with the King for the pardon of Sholto. And he, anticipating in the future a need of such knights, as he had said before, was easy to be entreated. So he had given the little tower called the Larg of Kenmore upon Tayside to Sholto to dwell in, and (said he) "If your Lady Margaret is waxen weary of her nunneries and mummeries, let her also go thither and keep the bairnies' frocks in order. It will be better work than a Douglas hath set hand to in this realm for some while!"

So, adieus being said, through the pleasant fields and fringing woods we betook us to Kenmore, Maud keeping close to Sholto that she might watch his face, causing him to get off and rest as often as she discovered a trace of fatigue. In time, however, we reached our goal, and lo! this thoughtful Laurence of ours had the house all fitted and arranged. (It was, as to its building a small farm-fortalice, not a great castle like Thrieve.) And whenever I had been ill-natured with him he had hugged himself, thinking, "Ah, wait, Mistress Margaret, till that which is coming, comes! Then will you not be sorry for these hard speeches and averted eyes!"

And I was sorry, but not so sorry as he thought or expected. Because I was glad that Laurence should have the heart within him to care so much of making others happy. The men I had dealt with hitherto had not the like much in mind—no, not even William Douglas.

The Larg of Kenmore was a place in which one might well be content to grow old. Also, none could wish for better and more loving company than that of Maud and Sholto. It had but one drawback: it was farther from the King's palace at Stirling, and so, of consequence,

we saw less of Laurence, or, at least, he came seldomer Yet, abiding in the house, where his bed was made down every night and his platter laid for every meal, it was happiness of a better kind than when I saw him but for an hour or two at the nunnery overlooking the towers of Dunkeld.

Yet, because in the course of this history I have had much to tell of these still places, where the crying of a bird or a change in the wind is a subject for an hour's converse, and the new moon seen over the right shoulder an occasion of festival, I shall say little about the Larg of Kenmore.

It was not by my choice that I spent so great part of my time in such quietnesses. I did not make my life—no, nor any part of it, saving perhaps when, in ignorance and perversity, having to choose between two brothers, like a woman I preferred the less worthy. But the rest of my life has been what men's power and men's ambitions have made it. God is over all. I doubt it not. He is great; but he seems to me so great that he interferes but little in the things of yesterday and to-day and to-morrow.

Yet, mayhap, I do not see fairly or judge aright. Had I been a common woman, without a groat, living in a better time, belike I had not had this to say, as I do say it from my heart; but with Galloway and the Borderlands, Ettrick Forest and Carrick, for my dower, I was, as I have said, little better than a hand-ball propelled by the players, William and James of Douglas, James Stewart the King, and Crichton the Chancellor.

And as for God, doubtless he watched from behind the window-lattice of his heaven; but, alas! he did nothing.

So at least I thought at the time. True, afterwards I came to see better of it when, despoiled, mine estate and quality made worth no man's while, I tasted at last the grave and dulcet securities of poverty.

But was I not speaking of the Larg of Kenmore, round which the heather ringed itself, and at whose very doorstep the whaups and wild moor-fowl cried suddenly in, making the bairns laugh at their meals?

Sholto grew slowly better, his wounds healing, like those of a child, by the first intention. But one day there came, sudden as the imbursting of one of the granite bolts of Mons Meg—Malise himself!

I was in the little hardly-won garden sitting by myself in a sheltered summer-house. I could see the house-door. It stood open, and in the dusk of the chamber on a couch lay Sholto, with Maud Lindsay cherishing him—sometimes with gentle touches that were not quite caresses, but more often with lifted finger and the same chidings and forbidding with which in time of sickness she entreated her children.

The bairns themselves were without the gate with Donald, the herd of the Larg, no doubt tumbling and wrestling among the heather like young dogs at play.

I heard the click of the yett, with which at night Donald barred in Sholto's scanty stock of bestial—for there were still wolves a-many in the fastnesses of Kenmore. I sat frozen dumb with apprehension. There stood Malise McKim, looking dourly at the little white house sleeping in the sun. Surely never grimmer wolf glared at sheepfold, than the brain-clouded Smith of Carlinwark upon the Larg of Kenmore.

Before I could move or cry out, he advanced with half-a-dozen great strides across the yard and paused at the door, his bulk blocking the entrance. I think he could see his son lying on his couch, and at the sight his hand instinctively sought his dagger.

Had not this, his first-born son, separated himself from all his family? Had not he and he alone balked the McKims of their revenge? For what purpose had Malise McKim come hither, save that he might take a second and surer vengeance upon his son unfaithful who had stood in the breach till James Douglas escaped?

But the hand of Malise had not so much as reached the inlaid handle of his dagger before Maud stood in the doorway. As she came she snatched up the great household carving knife from the top of the salt-box where, of habitude, it lay. And now she met the Armourer-Smith in the doorway.

I could see her clearly—Maud—but what a Maud! A lioness defending her whelps, a she-wolf at the den's mouth on the side of Briariach—these looked somewhat less fierce than she. She spoke no word. She only stood there, her arm a little drawn together as if to strike, her body half crouched for a spring, her fingers twitching on the haft. And this was Maud—my Maud, the mother who heard the babes say their prayers in the gloaming, and every day taught them from Holy Writ lessons of love and sacrifice.

"Go back!" she cried, her voice hoarse as that of a man in passion. "Go back, Malise McKim. You shall not lay hand on him till after you have slain me. And I will slay you first. God's help, I will!"

The smith looked at her a little bewildered. Then he drew his hand across his broad, deeply scarred brow with the gesture which had become habitual to him. His eye, no longer lurid or dangerous, seemed rather trying to arrange facts he did not comprehend, to make something clear to himself.

"You are Sholto's wife," he said, looking at her. "Yes—yes—I mind. He married young, over young. I passed the children on the moor." (Here Maud drew a long breath of apprehension—divided between desire to run out to see that all was well with Marcelle, with the twins, with Ulric and little David, and the yet more pressing need of abiding where she was to defend her husband.)

But the attitude of the smith was reassuring, even humble.

He looked past Maud to where his son lay on his couch. He smiled a little wistfully at him.

"Speak for me, lad," he said. "This Highland wife of thine takes me for a caird, a catheran, one that would rieve her of thee or carry away the bairns. Ye have a snod bit housie here, Sholto! Bid the mistress let your auld faither come his ways ben and rest him a while. For he has had a lang, lang road to travel, and never a friend to cheer him by the way!"

He looked so pitiful that Maud, impulsive at times,

though mostly since her marriage demure as a puss, dropped the knife and caught the old man about the neck.

"Indeed and indeed," she cried, "I am heart-sorry for my ill-bred temper. Yet am I of Highland blood, and I do not forget either good or evil! Come ben, our father, and speak peaceable things to us—for I feared—I feared——"

She did not continue the subject, and perhaps it was as well. For, it soon appeared, one dangerous locker of the armourer's mind was closed—for the time, at least.

Malise clapped her gently on the shoulder.

"Feared?"—he murmured caressingly, as to a child; "foolish lass, what was there to fear? Is not Sholto the eldest of my bairns? Are not you another? Wherefore should I hurt mine own? I have been at the Court and I am tired—tired of being grand—of having lackeys to wait on me, old Malise McKim! And they told me lies—lies—lies! Indeed—they do naught else all day long that I can see—these courtiers that go attired in scarlet and blue and wear devices upon their mantles. But I see through their lies!"

By this time he stood quite close to his son's couch.

"Ah," he said, touching the white cloth about his head, "what is this? Hast fallen, lad? Who hath dealt thee that doom's lunder on the crown? He that did it had some skill in cudgel play, I warrant him. For even when thou wast a lad, there were not many that could give thee better—let alone the breaking of thy head!"

The two stared at him in astonishment. Sholto was about to speak, but over his father's shoulder Maud made a sign to her husband to be silent.

Was it possible he had wholly forgotten Thrieve and all that had been done there? It seemed like it.

The old man bent over his son. He had the aspect of one about to communicate a weighty secret.

"Sholto," he said, in a low voice, "I came because they told me that you dwelt in a little house among the heather, and underlay the King's displeasure! Laurence told me so—but"—this a whisper—"Sholto, lad, they—

are—teaching—him—to—lie—at—the—Court, like the others!"

Sholto shook his head, but took his father gently by the hand.

"Care naught for 'says-he' or 'says-she,'" he answered soothingly. "Laurence is your own son. A McKim does not lie!"

The smith responded nothing for a while, passing his other hand to and fro across his brow a little wearily.

"Ah," he said, at length, "my own son, is he? A McKim, is he? Why then does he call himself a Stewart? And why then does he compel me to help him to forge cannon for a murderer?"

"*For a murderer?*" cried Sholto and Maud simultaneously, in the greatness of their astonishment.

The old man tip-toed to the door and looked out. The heather spread twenty leagues. The moor-birds cried. Then very carefully he shut it and came back to the side of Sholto's couch.

"Listen," he whispered, "they think I forget—that I am an old done man. But I do not forget. How should I forget that once I had a master—like to none the world hath seen! What of him? Who enticed him to his death? *One, James Stewart by name!* Who sat down to dine with my master? *James Stewart!* Who rose up with him and led him apart, his arm about his neck, as friend doth with friend when the heart is full and free! *Who but James Stewart?*"

He struck one hand hard into the palm of the other with a sound like the crack of a musket.

"But the jest's cream is that in the King's house they talk of naught but Thrieve and Mons Meg and a great victory gained over the Douglas! I keep a serious face, for I know that victory. The victory was gained by the traitor's dagger in the little back-room where they put my Lady Margaret to sleep the night she came to Stirling. There they gained their great victory—these Stewarts, and he the chief of all, the Murderer King who struck his friend to the heart, his hand yet warm from being about my master's neck."

Then with a pleased expression Maud nodded at Sholto. The armourer had forgotten all that had happened after the death of William Douglas. At that moment the sound of the voices of the children, as they raced homeward athwart the heather, came sharply in at the open window. Malise started up.

"What is that?" he demanded. "Hath the King sent for me? Am I to have no peace in this world?"

"They are but the voices of the bairns, father," said Maud softly, caressing the old gnarled hand which lay on the smith's knee, the fingers gathering themselves up, and again being thrust out tense and hard. "You shall have peace here with us, our father—so long as it pleases you to bide!"

"Peace—peace!" he repeated, with a hard intonation, as if something displeased him in the word. "Ah, Sholto, lad, you are here under the King's displeasure, and it is well. But James Stewart shall have no peace! No!"

Then with extraordinary fierceness of energy, almost the snarl of a wild beast, he added these words, "*Had Zimri peace that slew his master?*"

CHAPTER XLVI

JACK NEVILLE'S ANNE

IT was on the third day of the stay of Malise the Smith at the house of the Larg of Kenmore that there came a message from the King, at Stirling, commanding with all urgence the armourer's presence at Carron Straths, where the great new cannons were being made under Laurence's care.

This seemed greatly to excite Malise McKim, and with much roughness of speech he bade the messenger begone, lest a worse thing should befall him. But Sholto and Maud, knowing that much depended on the complaisance of the old man, laid it upon him to obey. And I also, following the hint given me by Maud, commanded him to go and do the King's will.

He took a strange, lingering look at me, as if to make sure that I had spoken in good faith.

"I understand your ladyship," he said. "Ye shall be richtit. By God's ain grace ye shall be richtit. Ye shall be avenged for the man ye lost by the bluidy hand o' the Stewart. Bide ye! bide ye! There shall be news to send! On a day—aye, on a day there shall be news that shall gar the heart o' ilka Stewart stand still frae Appin to the King's pailace o' Stirling!"

So, with no more said, Malise the Smith took his mighty piked staff in his hand, and, without so much as a Fair-good-day to any in the house, he set his bonnet on his head, and strode away over the moor as he had come, disdaining the help of any four-footed creature; the which was, indeed, as well, for there were no more than a pair of Highland shelties in the stables of the Larg, either of whom had been foundered at the first bog by the weight of the Armourer of Carlinwark.

When he was gone, we spoke with more ease of the strange forgetfulness of Malise McKim, and what it boded. For me I saw in it naught but good. He had forgotten Magdalen, James Douglas, and all that had since befallen. He had gotten what many pray for, more than for the forgiving of their sins—that is, Forgetfulness.

But Sholto was not so sure. He foresaw a danger. In time of flood the water will rise behind the dam, and the sluices were shut. The anger was yet hot in his heart. With Maud or with the little children, even with me, it vanished. The old nut-sweet nature came forth and sat in the sun. But with his son, once or twice, a certain dangerous madness, latent and essential, showed itself plainly. Added to this, Sholto perceived a power of concealment altogether unlike the Malise we had known, whose thought was a spoken word, and the word as like as not a blow.

At any rate we were all greatly relieved when the smith obeyed the King's mandate and strode away across the heather towards Carron.

Then on the fourth day thereafter came Laurence with news. His father had arrived safely at Carron straths, where the new cannons were in the making. He had looked with his usual contempt at the work which had been done during his absence at the Larg of Kenmore. Without saying a word to any as to his purpose, he had set off again for Stirling. Then, on his return, he declared that in the new task the King had set him, he would have none save his sons to help him, and not even all of these. Laurence (who called himself Stewart) might, he said, go and set up a forge for himself! Likewise Herries, who had in a manner been Laurence's favourite, might depart with him. There was no room for Stewarts or Gordons in Malise McKim's forge!

The sudden ill-will with which Malise dismissed Laurence was easily enough understood by us who had seen with pain the old man's lapses of memory. But it was easy to see that both Laurence and young Herries, who had stood the burden and heat of the day at Thrieve, and

especially in the making of Mons Meg, were much discountenanced by the Armourer's treatment of them.

But Laurence, at least, was not long so affected. He had the manifest favour of the King, and for his fidelity and intelligence had been promised the barony of Balveny—on condition that he should choose a wife pleasing the King.

Concerning this Maud in especial loved to tease him, alleging that the King had scores of Highland cousins, great and gaunt as pike staves, all stalled like cows in a byre, and all to be pensioned off with a man apiece and a forfeited forty-merk Douglas holding. And when, for some reason, Laurence grew restive under these words of his good sister, Sholto, ever kind of heart, would cry from his resting-chair, "Heed her not, Larry! I thought ye had more sense, man! What is it to thee to bear that for an hour, which it hath been my lot to hear ding-donging for years fifteen!"

Then would Maud toss her head and declare that she would go to her own folk, taking the bairns with her. But at this Sholto would only laugh the more and say, "Aye, Maud, will ye so?" As if he knew better—which indeed he did.

And to his brothers, Laurence and Herries, Sholto said kindly, "There is little enough for you to get here, lads, on the rough side o' the Larg o' Kenmore. These are not the fat lands of the Borel and of Balmaghie. But there are at least twice twenty score o' black-faced sheep and routh o' deer on the hills, and as for sport—the wild birds o' the lochs and the red grouse o' the heather come clockin' about the very door!"

So for a time Herries accompanied the Kenmore herds to the hills, helping them to make safe and commodious folds with closures of iron, such as would prevent the wolves and foxes from entering. For it was again the lambing-time, when was need of special care, the flocks being of necessity abroad all through the night watches.

But being thus exiled, Laurence bode for the most part about the house. And it is not strange that, Maud being much taken up with the care of Sholto and with the

learning of the bairns, it fell to him once more to be much in my company.

Yet, among other things, I noted a curious shyness in all his intercourse with me, almost something of apology and humility, as if he were conscious of having done me some secret wrong. Though what that could be it was not within my mind's scope to imagine. At this time also he would call me, "My Lady" and "My Lady Countess," till I had perforce to laugh at him and tell him that there were no "Lady Countesses" under the Fell of the Larg—adding that I had now lost my greatness and must be well content to be a sorner on the kindness of my good friends Sholto and Maud. "But," said I, "if so be that upon occasion you have time to remember an old friend, one of a fallen house—I pray you send us some of the beef and greens from the rich pastures of Balveny to eat with our small ale. For 'tis you, Larry, that are to be the great man now—carrying a king's name and all the rest of it!" So I continued, vexing him for my pleasure. "And then your learning! Why, Laurence, lad, they will make a fighting archbishop of you! For the vows of holiness, as I read them, though stiff as to the shedding of blood, give a man every liberty to knock out his adversary's brains!"

"I thank you," he said softly. "I have left all that behind me for ever!" For some reason he loved not to be reminded of his monkish life.

I can see him yet as he lay outstretched on the heather that day, his eyes downcast, and his whole mien troubled. I knew by instinct that there was something coming—something that he was ashamed to tell me. But I was equally resolved that I would do nothing to aid him, or to make his task easier. It was high on the side of the Larg fell in a favourite nook of mine. All my life I have loved falls of water—the white foam plunging into the brown deeps of the pools, shaded with the greenest of leaves, whispering and rustling. The love of such-like hath worked into my soul—perhaps because I was born on the wide flats of Dee, which the Douglases chose because they loved not to have aught within sight to over-

top their great arrogant selves, an it were not their own Castle of Thrieve.

Here then in a little linn were a few green birks about a rock on which I could sit quite dry, and yet so near the water that, by holding out my hand, I could feel the spray strike cool upon it, while at my feet there was a smooth of turf for one of the bairns, or, as it might be, Laurence to lie upon. I had chosen it so. A woman who hath been twice wedded, and made as little out of it as I, may surely be permitted to do something for herself ere she begins to grow old.

Laurence might still have been called the Young Man in Black, even as at the taking of Thrieve. And I do think that ever after he conserved, perhaps from his training of ecclesiast, a certain gentle austerity—which, to my eyes, at least, appeared very becoming. Slender he was, but strong, a little pale, and with a deep line of thought trenched between his brows. Beside him I felt very ignorant. Yet he would never correct me nor directly counter me in the wildest or most foolish things which I asserted. Only at some future time he would lead the talk to the same subject and with a certain instinct of nobility which was natural to him, would in a breath lay the whole clear and plain, without in the least appearing to reflect upon my lack of knowledge.

Ah, what a pair of brothers were these two, Sholto and Laurence McKim—if only William and James Douglas had been like them! That is what I was thinking as I sat there, holding out my hand fitfully, and letting the spray of the waterfall drip between my fingers. Between whiles I looked at Laurence. Then suddenly, to hide the sob that rose in my throat, I took a handful of water and cast it laughingly upon him. For of the brothers Sholto was Maud's from the first, and as to this Laurence—who would claim him? Had I not as mickle right as any?

Then the devil entering into me, I put a question to him, swiftly, without taking time to count the cost, as, indeed, I always did such things.

"Laurence," said I, "were you ever in love?"

He lifted his head as if to reproach me. Then, thinking better of it, he only shook his head.

"And yet, willy-nilly, you must marry?" I went on to tempt him. The King has given you Balveny and its barony on such and such conditions. Only I advise you not to marry for love. That is the easiest way to make shipwreck of the King's favour. Stick to one of Maud's Highland Stewarts—the King's kin, with a pedigree as long as her nose, and rank high as her cheek bones!"

"I shall not marry," he answered, slowly picking the fronds from a bracken one by one and throwing them into the linn. "I shall not bide longer in Scotland than is necessary! I will e'en go and take service with the King of France. He hath made me advances already, hearing doubtless some bruit of the battering of Thrieve with the great cannon——"

He stopped short, doubtless seeing some pain on my face.

"Leave Scotland," I cried, "leave me? I had—never—thought—it of—you, Laurence. Though why, I know not. You are free. None can say but you are free to come and go. But—but—then I shall have none to think of me—care for me! I thought you did, Laurence!"

In a moment he had thrown himself again at my feet. He had stood up while I was speaking, as if against his will erected and elated by my words. Now he was kneeling at my knees, his hands clasped as before an altar and all the soul of him in his eyes.

"Margaret," he said, "do not say that. It is wrong to say that. I love you—God knows—I who have no right to love you! I have loved ever since I was a lad in the smithy, and saw you over the shoulders of the men-at-arms sitting beside the Queen of Beauty at the great tourney. Yet I who love you thus am as a dog, a mean thing before you. You will spurn me when you know. And justly. I have here with me a letter from your husband in England. I have brought it three times to the Larg. Thrice I have carried it away again. I feared—ah, how I feared—that he summoned you to him in England—*and—that you would go!*"

He paused, all shaking with the vehemence of his emotion. His hair clung dankly about his brow.

"God's grace!" he murmured, "I could not do it. I could not give it. But I am stronger now. There is your letter, Lady Margaret. And try to forgive the man who goes from you wretched and heart-broken. As God is in his heaven, I will aid you to return to your husband. I will make it my sacrifice so to do. Then after that——"

He stopped, with the mere force of putting restraint upon his emotion. For to Laurence McKim these things came hard, being by nature reticent and of few words—that is, in the things nearest his heart, though light enough in other matters.

But I laughed, knowing James Douglas.

"Open and read the letter," I bade him. "He that was my husband is little likely to send across the border any such invitation to Margaret Douglas. Open—read! Why, man, wherefore do you shake? Can you not read? Are you not a clerk? Have you forgotten your letters? Open, I say!"

Yet, for all that, he would not. So at the last I snatched the letter from his hand, broke the seal, and bade him read.

I knew James Douglas's scrawl. He ever wrote as if with the point of a dagger, or, rather, with a wooden skewer picked from a butcher's stall in the market-place.

Then Laurence read aloud the words which I append hereto.

Dear Cozin Marget,—I write to tell you that I am marriet to Poor Jack Neville's Anne, she that was Anne Holland. I ken weel that ye will mak no wry nor scurvy faces over this news, but, contrary-wise, be heart-glad no longer to be tied to one who is forever tripping and stumbling towards the left hand.

Cozin Marget, I wish ye weel. I wad that it had been in my wig-wagging nature to be a better man to you. But now I must e'en do the best I can for Poor Jack Neville's Anne. She is bonnie for a widow woman, and young also—but hath brocht me no portion. If you have aught that you can spare from your stocking-foot, pray remember your loving Çozin James. For in truth I am in hard case for two or three hunder pound. The King hath given me his Order of the Garter for a bit battle I

focht for him near to Shrewsbury, and for cutting aff a Welshman's head. But I had rather he had given me the five hunder rose nobles he promised me than a hale cart-load of Garters.

But this one I did give to Poor Jack Neville's Anne to bind up her stockings withal. And, indeed, it was from certain giff-gaff and merriment we had between us anent the matter, in Poor Jack Neville's sometime rose garden that Anne and I cam to think of being marriet.

I hope, dear Cozin, you will not go into a nunnery. To my mind there is no sense in such places—but instead, I prithee, go find a better man than me! All the same, fair day or foul day, I am resolvit to do the best I can for Poor Jack Neville's Anne.

Whilk Receive from Your Loving Cozin,

JAMES OF DOUGLAS.

Above all do not forget the siller. John Tweedie, a merchant of barkit skins in the Wellgate at Carlisle town is a safe man to send it by, and kens me weel. If it is a matter o' a thousand merks, so mickle the better.

Written from my lodging in Southwark Borough Town where Anne and I would do not ill, an it were not for our poverty. Aprile the 30th.

. . . . . .

Never did changes more curious come over any man's face in the same space of time than those which passed over Laurence McKim's as he stood before me reading and rereading James Douglas's letter. I admit that I watched him some deal mischievously, and at the end I fairly broke into a tempest of laughter.

But Laurence did not laugh. He took the matter with great seriousness, not knowing my husband James as I did, nor comprehending his nature.

"Then you are a free woman!" he said, folding up the letter with an exceeding attention to the folds.

"I am, or shall be soon!" answered I, without taking my eyes off his face. Then all at once I remembered the phrase in James Douglas's letter, twice repeated, how he must try now to do his best for Poor Jack Neville's Anne!

At that there came a wicked thought into my head.

"Laurence," I said, going up to him softly and looking into his eyes, somewhere in the middle way betwixt tears and laughter, "if I ask you a question, will you give me a true answer?"

"That I will!" he said. "What is it?"

"But it is a favour I have to ask!" I continued. "Will you grant it?"

"An it involved the damnation of my soul!" he said, with the same convincing quiet.

"Then will you, too, do the best you can for Poor Jack Neville's Anne?"

CHAPTER XLVII

A RARE SALT FELLOW

WELL, after a time and a time Laurence and I went back to the Larg together, for the present determined to say naught about the matter, till I should have gone with my letter and petition to the King and the Archbishop. For though divorce was not at any time the canon law of Holy Church, yet in these outland realms of Scotland and England men heeded that but little when interest or inclination drove them. Moreover, the Pope, his Cardinals and Bishops, were ready enough to give absolution. For, be he priest or cardinal, 'twixt Caithness and Kirkmaiden all were in the King's hands, or, worse yet, in those of the great houses. And, mostly, a Cardinal ettled at the saving of his like just like another man, save Thomas à Becket only. But in my time, at least, there was never another like him in any kirk that I heard tell of. So that which lay before me to perform was just this—that I should go to the King and ask his leave to marry Laurence, and live retired and peaceably thereafter; the which permission I was certain of obtaining—that is, for a price.

So Laurence and I went in together, and I showed Sholto and Maud the letter. I gave it to them laughing, though there was a kind of shame in my heart, too, that ever I should have shared bed and board with such a man. Yet for all (I own it) I could not hate, or even greatly dislike James Douglas. As he said, he had always done his best for the "Poor Jack Neville's Anne" of the moment. Pity was that his best proved never very good, and never very lasting.

But when Sholto McKim read the letter, his countenance changed. He had never any great sense of the humours of life. And such an one as James Douglas was clean out of his ken.

"If I had but known in time that I was serving such a man," he said slowly with darkened brows, "I had slain him with my hand!"

Then I took his wounded right hand and kissed it tenderly, so that his face flushed with pleasure. For even now—nay more than ever now—I was to him his liege lady.

"You did better work with this your hand," I said, "when you kept the breach of Thrieve with naught but the edge of your broadaxe."

And as for Maud, she also came and stood beside me, glancing from one to the other of us, but not laughing as I expected. Then I saw a strange thing.

Maud cared nothing for that which made me laugh, naught for that which made her husband hot with anger—in itself naught for the letter of James Douglas, save—that it made of me a free woman.

She kept looking from one to the other of us—troubled and uncertain. Under her summer gown I could see her bosom heave.

Then Maud went to the door, and turning made a sign to me.

"Shall we go look for the children?" she said. But I knew she had other things to say to me than that. We were silent till we had put the house of Larg a hundred feet or so beneath our feet and were out on the open fell.

Then she spoke.

"Why will you not tell your Maud?" she said sadly.

"What am I to tell?" I answered, fencing with words.

"My Lady Margaret," she said with dignity, "if you do not deign to tell me, I will ask no more. But I think—I think—that after these many years I had not deserved this from you!"

And she began to sob.

"Maud—my Maud!" I cried with sudden contriteness, "I will tell you all that you wish to know—all there is to tell. You gave me a home with you when I had none other friends. You have loved me all my life! What is there I would not tell you?"

"And now you hide from me—you will not tell me——"

"Tell you what, dear Maud?"

"What Laurence hath said to you!"

At this I laughed outright. For somehow I seemed in a mood to laugh that day. The air was lighter, rarer, of a more intoxicating charm. It scented of the spring, and I seemed sharply to regain my youth again—the youth that had never been mine. Nay, I seemed to win it rather for the first time, savouring its sweetness in the very wind that blew off the hills of heather.

"Laurence say aught to me, dear Innocent!" I cried to her, laughing. "Ah, but it is our own dear Maud Lindsay who is the matchmaker! Would Laurence ever have had the assurance to speak of love to Margaret Douglas?"

Then Maud jerked her Highland head in the air.

"I know not," she said. "His brother had a Lindsay for the asking!"

"Ah, yes," said I, "the third time of asking, but Laurence would never have had the courage to ask even once!"

"Do not tell me," she said, turning suddenly upon me as she used to do at Thrieve when I was a little girl and had been misbehaving. "I see wickedness and deceit in your eye—in that of Laurence, too. There is something between you two. You need not deny it—not to me. You never could deceive me, even when you were a little kilted hempie that had been in the orchard stealing of the sugar plums. What is it?"

"Well——" I began, pouting and hesitating.

Then I believe verily that in another moment Maud Lindsay might have done even as she was used to do in those ancientest days I can remember—when on one occasion she greatly surprised a certain spoilt child the morning after she came out of the north to be her tutrix and companion.

"Nay," I said hastily, "Laurence said naught to me. But—*I had something to say to him.*"

"What was it?" she demanded fiercely. "Tell me all!"

"I know—but I promised not to tell! Ask himself!"

I cried over my shoulder and ran back quickly into the house.

She called one sentence after me.

"I might have thought!" she said. "I knew all the time why he stayed away from Thrieve!"

. . . . . .

So I went to see the King, Laurence and Herries going with me to be my squires in time of need. We rode poorly and unattended, both because that would be better pleasing to the King, who loved not arrays of folk riding hither and thither athwart his kingdom, and also because unless we had taken the herds from the hills, there were no other retinue about the Larg of Kenmore save only Sholto hirpling on his crutch.

First we went to Stirling and the King of Scots was not there. He had gone to Carron. We would find him on the straths, they said, watching the forging of the great cannon. Quoth another, "The King hath gone to Edinburgh to make him ready for the siege of Roxburgh castle—the sole strength still held by the English north of Berwick Bound. He cannot abide it and is making ready to batter it down."

From Carron to Edinburgh we followed on, and there at last we found the King marshalling his forces upon the Borough Muir.

"Ah," he cried, catching sight of me first, "what do you here, my little lady of Galloway? Is this biding within your bounds? Are you come to fight for us or against us? Or aiblins, would you lead a partizan revolt in your own pretty person? And what doth my bold Sir Laurence of the Black Plaid in your company, and this young McKim? Wherefore are not you two at Carron with the engines of war?"

Then I smiled at him and said, "These be too many questions for one to answer all at once even to pleasure a king. But as for me, I have come to show your Majesty this! And not for that alone!"

So with that I drew from my pocket the letter of James Douglas.

And then and there before all his men the King read

the letter aloud, from "Dear Cozin Marget," all the way through to "Written at our lodging in Southwark!"

Then he laughed very loud, as was his custom, slapping his hand upon his thigh hard and often.

"Faith, I was wrong," he cried. "I should have kept such a man within my kingdom. I shall never find another! He is salt enough, this husband of yours, to keep all the butcher's meat in Scotland fresh through the dog days. He puts off and on a wife as I would a glove—then eke writes to the last to send him the plenishing siller for the new. And a good lance too he was! None drave a better. And Lord! he had need—he had need! Ho! Ho! A rare salt fellow, brined through and through like a barrel-kept-herring—this James of Douglas! I take pleasure in him. I take great pleasure in him—now that it is too late!"

For after his kind he was a hearty man—this King who could murder a friend with a dagger-stroke, who found his way about among the commandments ten, much as Alexander solved the Gordian knot. A hot-headed, fiery-faced butcher-man, by nature a fighter, was this Stewart King—in some ways not unlike our own James—though his iniquities were rather those of the red hand and the blow struck in anger than the good-natured cavalier wantonnesses of my "Dear Cozin."

Then with the letter still between his fingers, the King cast the slantwise Stewart eye upon me some time before he spoke.

"And now I suppose ye will consider yourself a free woman and a wanter," he said, "so ye'll e'en be comin' to me to seek ye a man!"

"Nay, King James," I made him answer, "*that* I have already done for myself. Two I have had chosen for me—I will e'en be content to pick the other without the royal bounty! Besides, the King has mickle on his mind, and God forbid I should set him a task so thankless!"

"And wha is the lad? Tell us," cried the King; "mind this though—he gets neither a foot o' Gallowa nor o' Ettrick—never an inch south o' the Forth. But I willna say that gin he be a decent lad—I will not maybe gie ye

a park or twa to sow your oats somewhere at the back of beyont!"

Then all at once he seemed to forget, returning to James Douglas's letter, which he rolled like a morsel under his tongue, savoury and sweet.

"'Poor Jack Neville's Anne!'" he cried, blattering again on his thigh, "I must e'en tell that to the bishop! Yes, by the saints, Kennedy will taste that, I warrant him! Sly old dog that he is."

I stood before him waiting his reply.

"Your Majesty has not yet heard the name of the man I ask your permission to marry!" I said quietly.

"Well," he laughed, "'tis somewhat early days yet to be thinking o' that, when ye hae gotten never a line frae holy Kirk nor ony permit eccleciastical to stand afore the altar. But you Douglases were aye forehandit. Wha is the loon?"

"He is of your Majesty's name," said I, "and like all the Stewarts, blate to speak for themselves in such a matter. So I am sent to do it. This is he!"

"What?" cried King James, "the Lad in Black—the Nameless Master of Enginry—the Deevil-Bishop, the Armourer-Clerk—doubtless some Douglas loon in disguise? Him that made the plans for the cannon! Why, I have already given him the barony of Balveny! I ken not how that will do, little lady. That was yince Douglas ground, and if you set up your banner there you might trench upon My Majesty even yet!"

Seeing I did not answer, he went on, getting rid of his surprise in a cloud of words.

"Na, na—let him stick to his cannon-making and his fortifying! That will be better than taking to himself a little rebel wife like yoursel', wha will keep him in het water all the days o' his life! Let him choose again and choose better!"

"Better he could not choose," said I, "as, if he hath eyes in his head his Majesty must see for himself! Moreover, if Laurence gets me not—he will go to France to the service of Louis the King, from whom already he has had great offers!"

"Ah, will he—will he? We will see to that," cried King James. "We may be poor, but we know how to recompense our lieges as well as how to punish our enemies. There is old Malise now, the Master Armourer. He will not last long. At times madness looks out of the eye of him. But, Lord! what a hammerman! What a mighty smith! None like him since Tubal. If only he were younger and had the head—faith, I would sit on the throne of Westminster with the Two Roses, red and white, doing homage to me."

He stopped suddenly as if thinking deeply.

"But there, lass," he cried, "I have weared enough of my good time on your fule marrying and gie'in' in marriage. Go ye forthwith to Bishop Kennedy, and he will put ye in the way of being even with 'Poor Jack Neville's Anne!' But I trust that your chances of keeping your clerk-lad to yourself are better than poor Anne's. Ah, the rogue—what a villain! Troth, I would give him the Cross of St. Andrew to come back to be my court-jester!"

"My Lord," I made the King answer with some dignity, "I pray recall it to yourself that there was a time when a certain jest of James Douglas's well-nigh made your Majesty smile on the wry side of your face. The chance of those few hours at Stirling when Ormond and Murray and this same Lord James entered it with a thousand Douglases—I trow such a man is no safe court-fool!"

"I ken—I ken," he cried, waving me down with his hand, "James Stewart is no unfriend to plain speech, and takes no offence at what you say. But for all that thou art a little rebel, and if this your Lad in Black is to keep the upper hand of you, he must be of good council and have the ready hand. I will take him with me to the siege of Roxburgh to teach him his A, B—Buff! Meantime go thou to the Bishop. Get a warranty from him. Here, Morton, my seal! I will write a line on the back of Jamie Douglas's letter. *'On the day that Roxburgh is taken, this Laurence of the King's Name is to have Margaret Douglas in wedlock!'* There!"

Whereupon he signed, sealing the missive with the sig-

net royal, which Morton carried for him in a little silver box. Ere he gave it back to me, he turned over the letter, laughing afresh at every line. It seemed to have taken him greatly.

"Salt as the sea!" he shouted; "a rare one, by St. Andrew! Let him have his two hundred pounds in rose nobles sent to John Tweedie, that eident leather-seller in the Carlisle water-gate. See to it, Morton. He deserves the like and more. I warrant him—he will of a surety buy woman's falderals with it in the Chepe—*if he can* for Poor Jack Neville's Anne—if not, at least, for some other Anne!"

CHAPTER XLVIII

CANON LAW

ACCORDINGLY I betook me to Bishop Kennedy, who was at Edinburgh Castle, having wholly supplanted Crichton with the King. A kindly, pawky, common-looking man he was, most like a country meal miller, and with the same way of puckering up his eyes when he spoke to you, as if he feared that you would throw dust in them.

A thing which, according to the popular mouth, it was by no means easy to do with the same Bishop Kennedy.

But I soon found that he had heard of me, and that he was no stranger to the repute of Sholto and Maud Lindsay. He was acquainted also with the young engineer-clerk—to whom, for his services in Galloway, the King had given his name and the barony of Belveny which aforetime had been Little John's. Indeed there seemed to be nothing in the realm of Scots of which someone had not properly advised my Lord Bishop, and when he saw the King's letter he gave me what I most desired—right good encouragement that all should be to my desire. But he did it in his own way and took much time about it.

"All laws are full of quaintness," he said with his head to the side, and making a scratching on a piece of parchment, with the side of a pen, a noise to me very disagreeable. But I minded not that, the intent and purport of his words being good. "And in none is this quaintness so patent as in canon law. For the holy Kirk is bound to dwell in some state, under Something or Somewhat as Overlord, and men are but men with neck-banes, the most part of them fearing (and most reasonably) sharp swords and the tow rope! Also it is commanded in Scripture that we should all fear and obey in all things the King's Most Excellent Majesty. All which, together with the sign and seal upon the back of this most remarkable letter

from the sometime James, Earl of Douglas, dispose me to be of good hope that your affair may find a speedy and a hoped-for termination."

With that he went to the door and called to him one Gilbert A'Taggart, which surname, as I understand, signifies the son of a priest. But this Gilbert was some sort of nephew or relative to my Lord Bishop, though, of course, not by marriage. He was a young man, most maiden-like and comely, and he bowed to me after the Italian fashion, for his uncle had had him educated at Rome, whence he had brought back with him a knowledge of other things besides canon law.

"Seek me my great book on the law of the Church, the volume having regard to marriage," said the Bishop to young A'Taggart. "This is the case. Listen, Gilbert. You, who are well read upon the subject, fresh from the schools of Rome, can, perhaps give us light!"

The young man bowed obsequiously, as one who would say, "What your honour pleases!"

So presently the secretary brought a great book of yellow vellum, and the Bishop opened it at a place.

"'Marriage is one of the blessed sacraments of the Church apostolic and catholic!' Hum—hum——! That is not it. 'In the event of a man marrying his grandmother——' No, nor does that exactly meet the case in hand!"

"These are the facts, Gilbert——" (Here he muttered rapidly in the young man's ear.) "Do not you agree with me?"

"I agree," concurred the youth promptly; "so it was ever decided by our professors and teachers in the seminary. Indeed, such was the Holy Father's own opinion. Your Eminence is perfectly right in his interpretation. A marvel!"

And while the Bishop continued to mumble the Latin over and over, turning such words as struck him here and there into common speech, the secretary winked at me confidentially over his shoulder, smiling after the fashion of a choir boy or an ill-behaved acolyte at mass.

But when his master stood erect, shutting his finger

"'DEAR LADY, NO DIFFICULTY WHATSOEVER EXISTS!'"

upon the place in the book, Master A'Taggart grew all at once of a solemn countenance, as if laughter were very far indeed from his thoughts. The good bishop, having thus consulted the authorities to his satisfaction, stood a full minute pursing his lips and thinking deeply. Then he delivered his verdict.

"Dear lady, no difficulty whatsoever exists! Your first marriage was null—being, by the later Bull of the Holy Father, held as lacking a necessary and binding part of the ceremony. As to your second, that also may be considered as void—by canon law, that is, having been contracted with the brother of your—no, that will not do, for by hypothesis, you had no former husband. Let me see, let me see—canon law is a wonderful thing. We will try again. There must be a rule for that. Was James, Earl of Douglas, not your cousin-german? Ah, there is something in that!—something very grave in that! Marriage between cousins is against the clear letter of canon law. But the Bull of the Holy See, you say? Ah, I had thought of that. Nothing is more easy. His Holiness was misinformed as to the circumstances—that is all. Yes—yes—it is clear as day. Had the information been complete, the permission would never have been issued—*ergo, you have never been married at all.* Hence being a spinster, it follows that you are at liberty to marry to-morrow if you will. And happy will the man be, my child, who takes you to his heart!"

Then he turned to the secretary, who stood demure and slim at his elbow.

"You agree with me, I think, Gilbert, do you not?"

"Your decision is a marvel of acuteness, my uncle," said the youth. "Truly among all the doctors of Rome I never heard the like."

The Bishop took a pen and wrote rapidly, talking to himself all the while.

"Ah," he said, in voice of pulpit prelection, "to any but myself the case would have offered difficulties insuperable. You will see the King, my child. Tell him—tell him with what ease I made all clear as day!"

"I am going at once to the camp!" I answered.

"Ah," he said, "that is not so good! My child, be not taigled with the men-of-war. A camp is no place for a bairn like you—and ah—betrothed for the first time to an husband!"

"But the Queen is there," I said; "she goes to the siege of Roxburgh likewise!"

"Ah," he said drily, "then tell the King my decision by himself. Canon law is not a thing to be lightly spoken of before women. He is to remember that there is nothing so strictly forbidden by the laws of Holy Church as divorce. Yet," here he smiled, "why seek divorce when it is so much easier to prove by canon law that any previous and undesirable marriages never existed at all! Tell the King that—pray tell the King that! Do not forget!"

And indeed, even as the bishop had expounded, so it was done—all duly and in order. I was a woman who had never been wedded. James Douglas had committed no fault. In killing William Douglas, James Stewart had but destroyed a rebel and a traitor—not treacherously slain a friend new-risen from his table. All by canon law—laid down in order and proved to the hilt from the best authorities by the excellent Bishop of Dunkeld! Everyone satisfied, and everything for the best!

No—not all. There was an old man with a slumberous fire in the eyes of him—one Malise McKim by name, whom most in that gay camp had forgotten—who himself remembered no more his dead daughter (God granting it so mercifully!) but who had not forgotten the murdered master he had once served, nor yet the two young lads that had gone forth from Thrieve to their last Black Dinner in the Castle of Edinburgh.

All was smooth and well ordered in the affairs of Scotland and of the King—*but* there was this one blear-eyed old Armourer-Smith to be reckoned with.

CHAPTER XLIX

MALISE DOES HIS WORK

RIGHT royally arrayed was the King's camp before Roxburgh, the last English strength left untaken within his realm. To me it was a wondrous sight. For hitherto I had seen only the siege of a great fortress from the point of view of the besieged, and, indeed, immured as we had been in Archibald the Grim, not a great deal of that.

But now I was in the very midst of the movement. On the day after my arrival the Queen sent for me, and offered me shelter of her pavilion. I think that someone—perhaps the King himself—had warned her that a Douglas of the Black, even in adversity, might not be willing to be the maid-of-honour to the wife of a Stewart.

But, thanks to a lifetime of feeding a lonely heart upon the pride of race, I had nothing of that kind left. If they would but give me Laurence, and leave us two alone, with meat and drink sufficient and clothing decent to put on, I would thankfully have scrubbed floors for the Stewart, or stabled their beasts like any careful groom.

Now, while I remained in the camp I was permitted to go freely here and there. I saw the King constantly—a bustling, ingenious, angry man, subject to extraordinary bursts of temper. It was told through the camp how he had gone to the forge of the McKims, who were busy with a certain great gun which neared completion. Here something had not pleased him. The fitting wedges were not yet in position about the great rings of iron which held the gun together.

So in his access of fury he had lifted his hand to strike Malise. But to the surprise of all, the old smith took with extraordinary calmness—almost indeed with humility, the buffet which the King dealt him on the cheek. So

much so that all marvelled at it and admired—the King, in his calmer moments, not less than any.

All that the old smith answered was only this!—"There is no need of any words. That which I have never received from six earls of Douglas, shall I not take with gratefulness from James Stewart, King of Scots? Am I not, for the time being and for the matter in hand, his very humble servant?"

And when the King again came near with soft words, having gotten over his anger, as was his wont, Malise replied to him: "Your Majesty did but that which your Majesty had the right to do. The wrong was in this—that there was a slackness in the work. But I promise you the wedges shall be in their places on the day appointed for the bombard to fire, which is August the third!"

And so saying, he bowed to the ground in the ancient fashion. But his son Laurence, who was in the suite of the King, told me afterwards that there was a certain dull red glow in his father's eye which misliked him—deep, slumberous, volcanic, like the red pale-fires that look down of nights upon the fishers in the Bay of Naples when the lavas are out among the vineyards of Vesuvius.

As for Laurence himself, his father took not the least notice of him. Once he had ventured to address his father, but Malise gazed blankly at him for a moment.

"Steward of a Stewart," he muttered, "keep not too near thy master, the murderer, an thou wouldst escape his doom! Also keep far from me! I have neither art nor part in thee! I do the King's work, it is true, but for a time and for a price. Go thou and serve at thine own anvil, and the King recompense thee according to thy desert!"

But when I came across the old man at the black door of the cavernous smithy, where he was ending his work, he saluted graciously as of old. I was his lady—as he said, his true Master's wife. I inquired of him if he had nothing to ask of me concerning Sholto and Maud and the folk at the Larg of Kenmore, where he had been so happy.

But at this he passed his hand across his brow with the

same weary gesture of having forgotten something. Then gradually a part of his memory returned to him.

"Ah, Sholto—yes, I mind now," he murmured, "a good lad, Sholto—good to me, as was also his wife, the daft Hielant lass. But (I deny it not) she has grown wise with time. Naething tames thae licht-heeled hizzies like a raft o' bairns. I mind now—I mind. I was wi' them at the Larg o' Kenmore. There Sholto is underlying the King's displeasure—even as I mysel' did yesterday. He, the Stewart, strack me that hae served sax o' his betters, and been to them even as an honoured councillor and a friend. That was what my maister, the Earl William, your honoured husband, yince caaed auld Malise. I thocht on it yesterday wi' the print o' the Stewart's hand on my cheek. But I said nocht! Na, it didna become auld Malise to be speakin'!"

"It was doubtless but the King's hot temper," I said, not wishing the old man to fall into any trouble on my account, or that he should bring himself within the King's vengeance. "Think no more of the matter. Let me see you work! You are as of old the Master Craftsman! None denies that throughout all the camp!"

"Aye, do they indeed say that?" he cried with a leap of something like pleasure to his face. "Hath the old hand not yet wholly lost its cunning?"

I stood admiring the great iron monster which on the following day, being the third of August, was to vomit forth its thunderbolts upon the fortress of Roxburgh,

"Aye," said he, "ye are right, my Leddy of Douglas, it is indeed a great work! But," here he put his hand gently on my sleeve, "I will show you a greater yet."

And forthwith he took me to the farther end of the forge, where on a shelf stood a row of dark pails of a square shape, full of a dark liquid that looked like oil.

"I will show you a greater—a greater," he repeated, "the Royal Stewart—bah! I turn the back o' my hand on her. But here——" He put his fingers into the dense liquid and drew forth something that shone ebon-black in the red flicker of the forges. "None hath seen these but you, my lady. None hath the right to see them

save the widow of the man they murdered untimely. This——" he continued with a caressing motion of his fingers over the polished surface of the wood, "is the life of a man done up in little. I call this, 'James Stewart, Second of the name, King of Scots.' And this is e'en a kinsman o' your ain—'George Douglas, Earl of Angus,' the name o' him; and this," taking a third from a further vessel of the same black oil, "is your cousin of Morton. Then there is eke yin caaed after mysel'—Auld Malise (to whom His Maker be gracious!) Auld Malise the Smith, whom the wise folk hold to be perturbed in his mind. But believe them not, my leddy dear! Bide still the morn's mornin' and be late in putting on your claes, my bonny. There shall mair come forth to see the show than shall gang hame frae auld Malise's last morrice-dance upon their feet!"

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But since he had spoken thus at the Larg of Kenmore, and nothing had come of it, I confess that I paid no great heed to his words. Besides I was covenanted to meet Laurence that night, to go with him to the King for his last signatures and permissions. So after we had come forth from the pavilion royal, meeting with Herries and several of the McKim brothers who had slipped away from the forges after the gloaming, we made together the round of the camp.

And Corra made plaint to his brothers of the dumb, desperate silences of his father—also, what appalled them more, telling of his curious gentleness. It was more than a month since he had corrected or even threatened any of them with a gaud of iron!

"For all that, I like it not," said Corra. "Such womanliness is not like our father. He will bide at the forge half the night working at his own ploys, snecking the door upon us, and daring us to come within a hundred paces of the smiddy. No, it is maist doom's unlike my faither!"

And so said they all of them.

But, I confess it with shame, I paid small heed to their words. For I, who had been shut up in great cham-

bers all my days, yet with no *goo* for them—who had seen life (in all that concerned master and man, lord and lackey) only from the upper side, was pleased beyond words to hear the crackling of the lighted camp fires, to watch the press of men about the ration tents, to touch the covered guns waiting the morrow's morn to speak their word, sheeted down to keep out the dews of the hot season. Yea, even, wrapped in Laurence's cloak, it tasted good to me to listen to the rough talk of certain Galloway lads about the fires. Some of them were lying toasting strips of ox-flesh on pointed sticks and tearing off morsels as they were ready, burning their fingers amid their own imprecations and the laughters of their comrades.

All was gay, and made for gaiety in others. And I, who had lived these many years retired and set apart, rejoiced beyond words to be thus abroad after dark in the midst of such a moving jolly world of men and things, the great English fortress looming dark behind all, as if it leaned against the highest stars.

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The next morning showed fair and clear. The camp was early astir, for this day the great bombard, Malise's masterpiece, was to speak for the first time. The "Royal Stewart" was set out on a knoll facing the castle, which would offer a fair enough mark in the sunshine of the morning. From the walls, dark with English archers and culverin-men, a fire was kept up upon all who showed themselves near enough to be reached, and also, for the honour of the thing, as it were, powder was wasted upon many others who were far out of reach.

For me, the night adventure in the camp, the sense of wandering at liberty where I had never been permitted to go before, under the protection of the man I loved, the night air, the freshness—all conspired to make me sleep far beyond my ordinary hour.

When I sat up in my bed, there grew conscious an unwonted sense of emptiness and loneliness all about. No noise of merry voices in the Queen's pavilion, at one end of which I lay—the every-day clash of arms, the bray

of trumpets, the brawling "kyangle" of voices, equally sunk into an uncanny silence.

Actually, there was a lark singing up somewhere in the lift.

I leaped from bed, and, swiftly as I could, did my gown and shoes upon me. The moment I looked out of the tent door all was explained. There on a little green hill away to the left of the camp, was the great bombard, the Royal Stewart, plain to be seen. The King's artificers in wood had, during the night, run a little fence about it to keep at a distance the crowd of sightseers. But within I could see a few figures moving about, Malise himself, the King, one or two of his lords, the royal favourites, and—Laurence.

All at once there leaped up in my mind the warnings of Malise to me to bide in my bed that morning. A kind of wild terror laid hold on me. Laurence was there—it might be in sore and instant danger. What were the strange and ebon-black wedges in their baths of oil. They carried each of them, Malise had said, the life of a man. He had even named them—the King, Angus, Morton, himself!

Why had he told me this?

Was it only part of that sombre, threatening madness which for months had looked out of his eyes, or some sudden desperate vengeance he was planning to take upon the murderer of the master he had loved? Strange it was, that, as soon as James Douglas escaped from his revenge, all memory of Thrieve and his daughter Magdalen went from his mind clean as a wiped slate. And in its place, imminent, instant, overwhelming as if it had happened yesterday, stood forth the figure of his true master demanding vengeance—William Douglas, murdered at Stirling by the King's own hand. Others may explain this. I only set down the facts. It may be that through her great sacrifice, the spirit of Magdalen had found rest, but that of William Douglas, sent unsained to its doom, troubled Malise with purposes of vengeance.

Be this as it may, seeing Laurence there among the

others, fear took on me and I ran for the hill-top with all the speed of which I was capable—no great thing perhaps, but sufficient to bring me there in time before the last preparations were finished.

"I have a message for the King!" I cried; "let me pass."

The soldier at the barrier, knowing me of the party of the Queen, saluted and caused open a way for me. I ran straight up the gentle slope towards the great bombard, which, huge as the trunk of the greatest oak in Cadzow forest, hung threateningly above my head on its cradle of iron.

The mouth was pointed in my direction, but, of course, elevated for the range of the castle. I ran straight upon the group. Malise was busy about the great iron monster, and, for all his weight and his years, running hither and thither like a cat. He had a wooden mallet in his hand, and I could see him firming and loosening the wooden wedges of the great rings, striking here on the broad butt, and anon with a broad-faced chisel easing the pressure again till he had gotten the whole to his mind. The King and several lords watched him with interest, the King even mounting on the cradle in order to see better.

Laurence, who had pointed the gun for the bomb to strike the middle of the castle wall, stood a little behind, and at first, as I came from the front, was hidden from my sight by the black mass of the gun and her carriage.

I stopped short, not knowing what to do or say. All seemed as it should be, every man absorbed in the great occasion. Yet, perhaps for that reason, it was left to me, a woman, to see something which had escaped all the others.

The wedges were those which I had seen in the oil-tanks—black, dripping, polished like glass.

"Stop!" I cried, "I beseech you all to go away. There is danger here—perhaps death!"

The King looked over and saw me. He had been standing on the carriage pillar.

"What would you?" he cried angrily. "This is no place for girls. Get you to the Queen!"

Then I saw the slumberous red eyes of Malise as he erected himself from his wedge-tapping. They were not malignant, more kindly and pleasant, indeed, than usual.

"Let her bide—let her bide," he cried. "She hath lost her good liege Lord! What wants she more with this world?"

"But there is danger," said the King, motioning with his hand. "Go—I command you. We are about to fire!"

At the word Malise went to the touch-vent, standing a moment high above all with the lighted match in his hand. His face, which had been lurid and dark even in the light of the high blue day, suddenly and inexplicably cleared.

"King of Scots," he cried, "there is one thing I would say before we try the bombard. Its name shall not be the 'Royal Stewart,' but the 'Royal Douglas,' in memory of him whom ye slew because he was the greater. His voice shall speak to-day!"

I could see the lords draw together and touch each other knowingly with hand and elbow.

"The mad smith is worse than usual to-day!" That is what they meant to say, with a sneer and a laugh.

But the King, with an imperturbable face, held his ground. Certainly no coward was this James Stewart, called of the Fiery Face.

"Christen it what you will, only go on—do your work, Malise McKim," he cried. "Come hither, Angus! Hither to me, Morton! This is a sight ye shall not see twice!"

"Nay, not twice!" cried the old smith mockingly, "hither Angus! Hither Morton—traitor Douglases both! Ye, too, have slain your master—learn how to die!"

By this time I had my hand upon the collar of Laurence's blouse, of the strong rough stuff which he wore at his enginry. Suddenly leaning all my weight upon it, I brought us both to the ground at the very moment when I saw Malise set his blazing match to the touch-hole!

The roar of the bombard was followed by a cry more great and terrible still. For a moment it seemed as if

all who a moment before had stood about were lying in their blood. The great cannon had burst at the first trial. The wedges had slipped like glass. Morton was fallen on his face with his arms outspread. Angus, pale as parchment, lay wounded to the death. The King, when they went to lift him up, was dead. And as to Malise the Smith, after that great explosion, in plain words—he was not!

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Thus was avenged the Great Treachery of the ante-chamber of Stirling. Only Laurence and I came through scatheless, of all that watched the first firing of the mighty bombard the Royal Stewart, the masterpiece of the Armourer Smith, Malise McKim. Yet none knew that the old man had given his life to avenge his master. None, that is, save I Margaret Douglas, who had seen the wedges asteep in the black oil, and the man whom God had given me. "It was an accident," said all men. And Laurence and I let them think so. For that was best.

Even as Malise had foretold, so it came to pass. The very wedge which he had called by the name of "James, King of Scots," slew the King, striking him swift and sudden, even as he had slain William, Earl of Douglas, his friend and guest.

Thus and not otherwise did Malise the Smith finish his work.

CHAPTER L

THE WORN PATH

I AM an old woman, and wearied with much writing; yet like any young girl, I have my dreams of love, and may be permitted to tell them. Late have I sat, and long; early have I risen, and oft, through the stars of midnight, I have seen the daylight break upon the world as I sat at my task. And now that it is done, though I had thought that I would rejoice, my heart is no little sore; for the days are long without Laurence, and the bairns also gone forth from me, though only to homes of their own, houses, and husbands, and children.

Yet why should I complain? Few are the women who have known a longer or a happier life with the man of their heart that I had with Laurence. Two children were given to us, and now remain to me—that is, as often as their husbands will let them.

But, better than the great places they inhabit, I love the little house of Balveny, where Laurence and I tried the day of mean things, and found it right pleasant. Yet as well, or better almost, do I love the Larg of Kenmore, where still dwell, in their green age and unseared leaf, Sholto and Maud together. I grudge them not their untouched happiness. Maud is dearer to me than ever. She it was helped me to close my husband's eyes, each of us holding a hand, and Sholto standing at the feet.

Then she came and kissed me.

"We are old women, you and I, Margaret," she whispered; "but it is good to have known love once, and life once, aye, and also death once, when it breaks not love!"

And, indeed, she was right, and Kennedy, the great Bishop, was right. All these forty years of my wedded life with him, scarce once did I think that thrice I had stood at the altar. I had, as said the canon law, been

wedded but once. I was the wife of one husband, even Laurence—who alone taught me the sweetness of poverty when it is shared betwixt two, and the steadfast gladness of that pavilion of love—which to us was a quiet habitation, a tabernacle not to be taken down, nor the stakes removed, nor so much as one of the cords thereof broken. For the rest there remains little to tell, save that which shall sufficiently serve to round my tale.

Duly James Douglas gat his two hundred rose nobles from the King's treasury, whether "Poor Jack's Neville's Anne" profited by them or no I will not swear. Like the wild ass he was, James abode in London, snuffing up the air of hostels and taverns, of palaces and call-houses, with an equal relish. Upon occasion he would lead an army into Wales or head a foray upon Scotland with the cheerful readiness of the mercenary.

Happy and well he lived (I doubt it not), his sword on his thigh, his damoiselle by his side—Jack Neville's Anne or another—little it mattered to hard-living, hard-fighting Lord James, last Earl of Douglas and first Scots Knight of the Garter.

But at the utmost end of his life, by one of those twists of fortune which advertise a Providence with a certain sense of the humour of things, it was his lot to die a monk of Lindores—he who had taken life with both hands and said, "This and this shall be mine, because it is good!" And the word he spake upon his ill fortune is worth setting down. For, being captured on a raid into Scotland fighting with the English against his own countryfolk, they asked him whether he was content to save his life by becoming a brother of the monastery of Lindores.

"Ow aye," quoth James Douglas, "he that can no better do, maun e'en be a monk!"

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And now, not unhappy—nay, often strangely filled with joy, when Maud and Sholto are not with me, I, Margaret Douglas, called Stewart, sit by the window and read what of Laurence's books my dim old eyes can make out. They were bonny to look into once (so they told me).

And mostly I think on the things that were. On William Douglas whom I never loved—on James that never loved me—on the last of the Douglases of the Black laid aneath the parsoun's lilac bushes in the quiet kirk-acre of Balmaghie. Upon the slow beeking up of the vengeance fires in the heart of Malise, I also make my meditation. But most I think upon the marvellous long arm of God, the Maker of all, and how and why He permitted the ill-doer, even James of Douglas, to flourish till his green bay tree grew sear and old—nay, to die at the last a holy man.

And then I wonder, high and sore I wonder—as to repentance and punishment—kirk law and canon law, the law of the sowing and the law of reaping that which a man hath sown—of Him too of whom the Douglases, Black and Red alike, thought not mickle—yet who came (so I read) to teach forgiveness to men. As to that, I was as my forbears till Laurence taught me. For my husband was great and wise, and learned the spirit of Joseph's Son—practised it, too, which is more.

So now in these last days I can think of Lindores and of James Douglas mumbling litanies in his stall—yea, and even hope (I have not yet made it a prayer) that after all he died forgiven. That he would never ask it, I know. He never dreamed he had done aught to need forgiveness.

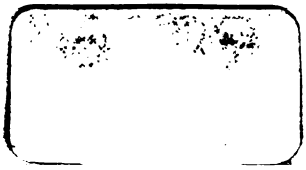
But most of all, and that which brings the strange suffusing joy to eyes that have looked on the world for over seventy years, is to sit with the window open upon the fell, watching the little path which his feet wore—the way Laurence used to come home to me for forty years.

Then, while I sit long and con over the Book, which he taught me to read in our long years together, till I am a-weary, lo! the gloaming comes up the glen, and there goes a thrilling through me that is not of this earth. The age vanishes from my limbs. The sight returns to my dim eyes. The clear heaven opens above, and I come out upon a place where there is no night.

But even then the path his feet trod remains on the hillside yonder. I can see it sitting here—yes, sitting and waiting—an old woman, but with a young heart in my breast.

Also I know, and rejoice that the time is not far off when I shall see him come down that path, my Laurence, whom I loved.

Then, from the old worn chair where I have watched and waited for him so long, I shall rise to my feet and say, *"Beloved!"* And behold, after that, the chair, the house, and the world shall know me no more for ever!

Because he and I shall have gone up that worn path together, hand in hand, silent—but not afraid.

THE END